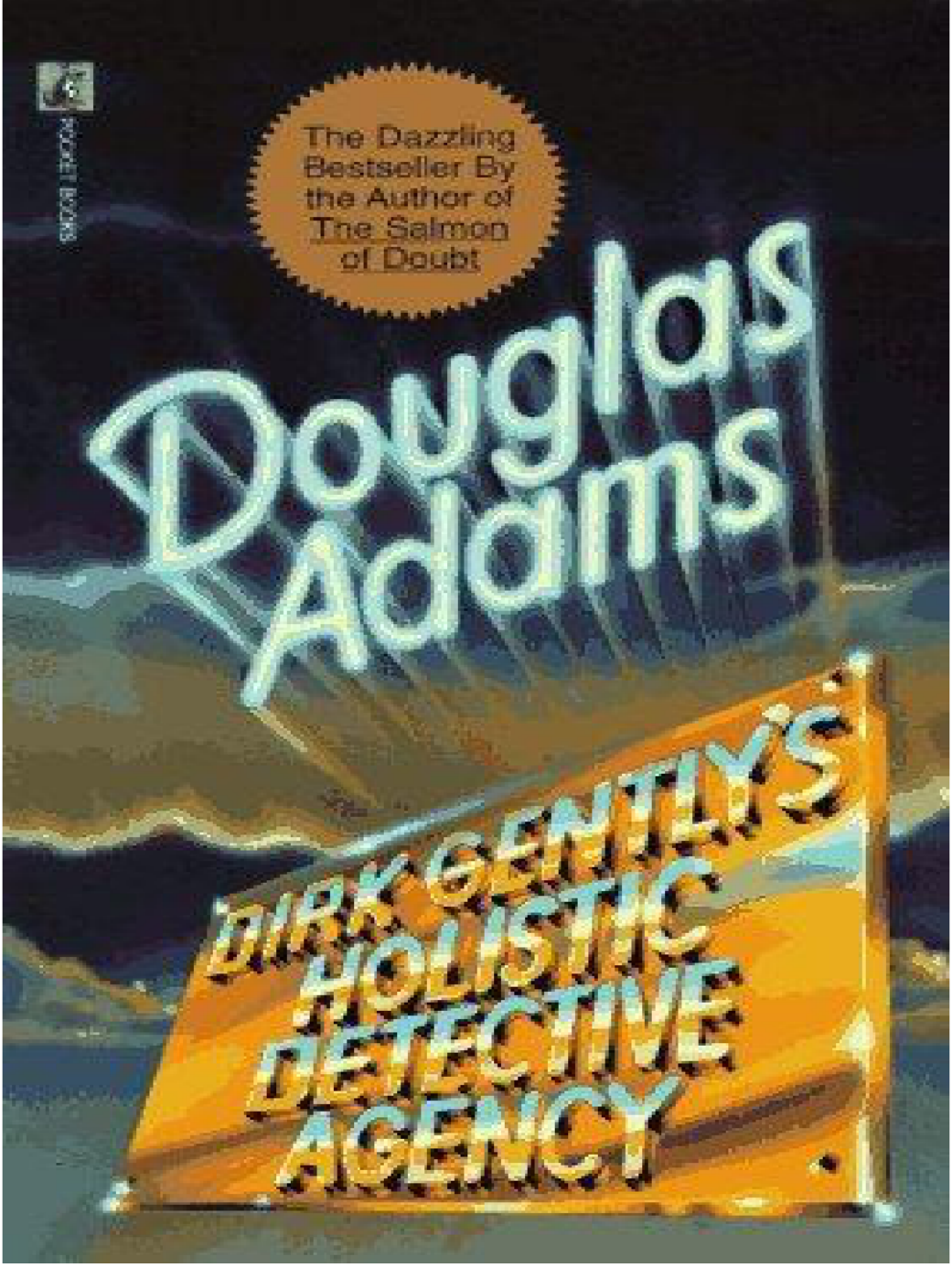
POCKET BOOKS
The Dazzling Bestseller By the Author of The Salmon of Doubt
Douglas Adams
DIRK GENTLY'S HOLISTIC DETECTIVE AGENCY

Dirk Gently 1 - Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency

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By Adams, Douglas
To my mother, who liked the bit about the horse
AUTHOR’S NOTE

The physical descriptions of St Cedd’s College in this book, inso far as they are specific at all, owe a little to my memories of StJohn’s College, Cambridge, although I’ve also borrowed indiscriminatelyfrom other colleges as well. Sir Isaac Newton was at Trinity College inreal life, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge was at Jesus.

The point is that St Cedd’s College is a completely fictitiousassemblage, and no correspondence is intended between any institutionsor characters in this book and any real institutions or people, living,dead, or wandering the night in ghostly torment.

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Douglas Adams
London, 1987

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CHAPTER 1

This time there would be no witnesses.

This time there was just the dead earth, a rumble of thunder, andthe onset of that interminable light drizzle from the north-east bywhich so many of the world's most momentous events seem to beaccompanied.

The storms of the day before, and of the day before that, and thefloods of the previous week, had now abated. The skies still bulgedwith rain, but all that actually fell in the gathering evening gloomwas a dreary kind of prickle.

Some wind whipped across the darkening plain, blundered throughthe low hills and gusted across a shallow valley where stood astructure, a kind of tower, alone in a nightmare of mud, and leaning.

It was a blackened stump of a tower. It stood like an extrusionof magma from one of the more pestilential pits of hell, and it leanedat a peculiar angle, as if oppressed by something altogether moreterrible than its own considerable weight. It seemed a dead thing, longages dead.

The only movement was that of a river of mud that movedsluggishly along the bottom of the valley past the tower. A mile or sofurther on, the river ran down a ravine and disappeared underground.

But as the evening darkened it became apparent that the tower wasnot entirely without life. There was a single dim red light guttering deep within it.

The light was only just visible — except of course that therewas no one to see, no witnesses, not this time, but it was neverthelessa light. Every few minutes it grew a little stronger and a littlebrighter and then faded slowly away almost to nothing. At the same timea low keening noise drifted out on the wind, built up to a kind ofwailing climax, and then it too faded, abjectly, away.

Time passed, and then another light appeared, a smaller, mobilelight. It emerged at ground level and moved in a single bobbing circuitof the tower, pausing occasionally on its way around. Then it, and theshadowy figure that could just be discerned carrying it, disappearedinside once more.

An hour passed, and by the end of it the darkness was total. Theworld seemed dead, the night a blankness.

And then the glow appeared again near the tower's peak, this timegrowing in power more purposefully. It quickly reached the

peak ofbrightness it had previously attained, and then kept going, increasing,increasing. The keening sound that accompanied it rose in pitch andstridency until it became a wailing scream. The scream screamed on andon till it became a blinding noise and the light a deafening redness.

And then, abruptly, both ceased.

There was a millisecond of silent darkness.

An astonishing pale new light billowed and bulged from deepwithin the mud beneath the tower. The sky clenched, a mountain of mudconvulsed, earth and sky bellowed at each other, there was a horriblepinkness, a sudden greenness, a lingering orangeness that stained theclouds, and then the light sank and the night at last was deeply,hideously dark. There was no further sound other than the soft tinkleof water.

But in the morning the sun rose with an unaccustomed sparkle on aday that was, or seemed to be, or at least would have seemed to be ifthere had been anybody there to whom it could seem to be anything atall, warmer, clearer and brighter — an altogether livelier day thanany yet known. A clear river ran through the shattered remains of thevalley.

And time began seriously to pass.

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CHAPTER 2

High on a rocky promontory sat an Electric Monk on a bored horse.From under its rough woven cowl the Monk gazed unblinkingly down intoanother valley, with which it was having a problem.

The day was hot, the sun stood in an empty hazy sky and beat downupon the grey rocks and the scrubby, parched grass. Nothing moved, noteven the Monk. The horse's tail moved a little, swishing slightly totry and move a little air, but that was all. Otherwise, nothing moved.

The Electric Monk was a labour-saving device, like a dishwasheror a video recorder. Dishwashers washed tedious dishes for you, thussaving you the bother of washing them yourself, video recorders watchedtedious television for you, thus saving you the bother of looking at ityourself; Electric Monks believed things for you, thus saving you whatwas becoming an increasingly onerous task, that of believing all thethings the world expected you to believe.

Unfortunately this Electric Monk had developed a fault, and hadstarted to believe all kinds of things, more or less at random. It was even beginning to believe things they'd have difficulty believing inSalt Lake City. It had never heard of Salt Lake City, of course. Norhad it ever heard of a quingigillion, which was roughly the number ofmiles between this valley and the Great Salt Lake of Utah.

The problem with the valley was this. The Monk currently believedthat the valley and everything in the valley and around it, includingthe Monk itself and the Monk's horse, was a uniform shade of pale pink.This made for a certain difficulty in distinguishing any one thing fromany other thing, and therefore made doing anything or going anywhereimpossible, or at least difficult and dangerous. Hence the immobilityof the Monk and the boredom of the horse, which had had to put up witha lot of silly things in its time but was secretly of the opinion thatthis was one of the silliest.

How long did the Monk believe these things?

Well, as far as the Monk was concerned, forever. The faith whichmoves mountains, or at least believes them against all the availableevidence to be pink, was a solid and abiding faith, a great rockagainst which the world could hurl whatever it would, yet it would notbe shaken. In practice, the horse knew, twenty-four hours was usuallyabout its lot.

So what of this horse, then, that actually held opinions, and wassceptical about things? Unusual behaviour for a horse, wasn't it? Anunusual horse perhaps?

No. Although it was certainly a handsome and well-built exampleof its species, it was none the less a perfectly ordinary horse, suchas convergent evolution has produced in many of the places that life isto be found. They have always understood a great deal more than theylet on. It is difficult to be sat on all day, every day, by some othercreature, without forming an opinion about them.

On the other hand, it is perfectly possible to sit all day, everyday, on top of another creature and not have the slightest thoughtabout them whatsoever.

When the early models of these Monks were built, it was felt tobe important that they be instantly recognisable as artificial objects.There must be no danger of their looking at all like real people. Youwouldn't want your video recorder lounging around on the sofa all daywhile it was watching TV. You wouldn't want it picking its nose,drinking beer and sending out for pizzas.

So the Monks were built with an eye for originality of design andalso for practical horse-riding ability. This was important. People,and indeed things, looked more sincere on a horse. So two legs wereheld to be both more suitable and cheaper than the more normal primesof seventeen, nineteen or twenty-three; the skin the Monks were givenwas pinkish-looking instead of purple, soft and smooth instead ofcrenellated. They were also restricted to just one mouth and nose, butwere given instead an additional eye, making for a grand total of two.A strange-looking creature indeed. But truly excellent at believing themost preposterous things.

This Monk had first gone wrong when it was simply given too muchto believe in one day. It was, by mistake, cross-connected to a videorecorder that was watching eleven TV channels simultaneously, and thiscaused it to blow a bank of illogic circuits. The video recorder onlyhad to watch them, of course. It didn't have to believe them all aswell. This is why instruction manuals are so important.

So after a hectic week of believing that war was peace, that goodwas bad, that the moon was made of blue cheese, and that God needed alot of money sent to a certain box number, the Monk started to believe that thirty-five percent of all tables were hermaphrodites, and thenbroke down. The man from the Monk shop said that it needed a whole newmotherboard, but then pointed out that the new improved Monk Plusmodels were twice

as powerful, had an entirely new multi-taskingNegative Capability feature that allowed them to hold up to sixteenentirely different and contradictory ideas in memory simultaneouslywithout generating any irritating system errors, were twice as fast andat least three times as glib, and you could have a whole new one forless than the cost of replacing the motherboard of the old model.

That was it. Done.

The faulty Monk was turned out into the desert where it couldbelieve what it liked, including the idea that it had been hard doneby. It was allowed to keep its horse, since horses were so cheap tomake.

For a number of days and nights, which it variously believed tobe three, forty-three, and five hundred and ninety-eight thousand sevenhundred and three, it roamed the desert, putting its simple Electrictrust in rocks, birds, clouds and a form of non-existent elephant -?asparagus, until at last it fetched up here, on this high rock,overlooking a valley that was not, despite the deep fervour of theMonk's belief, pink. Not even a little bit.

Time passed.

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CHAPTER 3

Time passed.

Susan waited.

The more Susan waited, the more the doorbell didn't ring. Or thephone. She looked at her watch. She felt that now was about the timethat she could legitimately begin to feel cross. She was cross already,of course, but that had been in her own time, so to speak. They werewell and truly into his time now, and even allowing for traffic,mishaps, and general vagueness and dilatoriness, it was now well overhalf an hour past the time that he had insisted was the latest timethey could possibly afford to leave, so she'd better be ready.

She tried to worry that something terrible had happened to him,but didn't believe it for a moment. Nothing terrible ever happened tohim, though she was beginning to think that it was time it damn welldid. If nothing terrible happened to him soon maybe she'd do itherself. Now there was an idea.

She threw herself crossly into the armchair and watched the newson television. The news made her cross. She flipped the remote controland watched something on another channel for a bit. She didn't knowwhat it was, but it also made her cross. Perhaps she should phone. Shewas damned if she was going to phone. Perhaps if she phoned he wouldphone her at the same moment and not be able to get through.

She refused to admit that she had even thought that.

Damn him, where was he? Who cared where he was anyway? Shedidn't, that was for sure.

Three times in a row he'd done this. Three times in a row was enough. She angrily flipped channels one more time. There was aprogramme about computers and some interesting new developments in thefield of things you could do with computers and music.

That was it. That was really it. She knew that she had toldherself that that was it only seconds earlier, but this was now thefinal real ultimate it.

She jumped to her feet and went to the phone, gripping an angryFilofax. She flipped briskly through it and dialed a number.

"Hello, Michael? Yes, it's Susan. Susan Way. You said I shouldcall you if I was free this evening and I said I'd rather be dead in aditch, remember? Well, I suddenly discover that I am free, absolutely,completely and utterly free, and there isn't a decent ditch for milesaround. Make your move while you've got

your chance is my advice toyou. I'll be at the Tangiers Club in half an hour."

She pulled on her shoes and coat, paused when she remembered thatit was Thursday and that she should put a fresh, extra-long tape on theanswering machine, and two minutes later was out of the front door.When at last the phone did ring the answering machine said sweetly thatSusan Way could not come to the phone just at the moment, but that ifthe caller would like to leave a message, she would get back to them assoon as possible. Maybe.

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CHAPTER 4

It was a chill November evening of the old-fashioned type.

The moon looked pale and wan, as if it shouldn't be up on a nightlike this. It rose unwillingly and hung like an ill spectre.Silhouetted against it, dim and hazy through the dampness which rosefrom the unwholesome fens, stood the assorted towers and turrets of StCedd's, Cambridge, a ghostly profusion of buildings thrown up overcenturies, medieval next to Victorian, Odeon next to Tudor. Only risingthrough the mist did they seem remotely to belong to one another.

Between them scurried figures, hurrying from one dim pool oflight to another, shivering, leaving wraiths of breath which foldedthemselves into the cold night behind them.

It was seven o'clock. Many of the figures were heading for thecollege dining hall which divided First Court from Second Court, andfrom which warm light, reluctantly, streamed. Two figures in particularseemed ill-matched. One, a young man, was tall, thin and angular; evenmuffled inside a heavy dark coat he walked a little like an affrontedheron.

The other was small, roundish, and moved with an ungainlyrestlessness, like a number of elderly squirrels trying to escape froma sack. His own age was on the older side of completely indeterminate.If you picked a number at random, he was probably a little older thanthat, but — well, it was impossible to tell. Certainly his face washeavily lined, and the small amount of hair that escaped from under hisred woollen skiing hat was thin, white, and had very much its own ideasabout how it wished to arrange itself. He too was muffled inside aheavy coat, but over it he wore a billowing gown with very faded purpletrim, the badge of his unique and peculiar academic office.

As they walked the older man was doing all the talking. He waspointing at items of interest along the way, despite the fact that itwas too dark to see any of them. The younger man was saying "Ah yes,"and "Really? How interesting…" and "Well, well, well," and "Goodheavens." His head bobbed seriously.

They entered, not through the main entrance to the hall, butthrough a small doorway on the east side of the court. This led to theSenior Combination Room and a dark-panelled anteroom where the Fellowsof the college assembled to slap their hands and make "brrrrrr" noisesbefore making their way through their own entrance to the High Table.

They were late and shook off their coats hurriedly. This was

complicated for the older man by the necessity first of taking off hisprofessorial gown, and then of putting it back on again once his coatwas off, then of stuffing his hat in his coat pocket, then of wonderingwhere he'd put his scarf, and then of realising that he hadn't broughtit, then of fishing in his coat pocket for his handkerchief, then offishing in his other coat pocket for his spectacles, and finally offinding them quite unexpectedly wrapped in his scarf, which it turnedout he had brought after all but hadn't been wearing despite the dampand bitter wind blowing in like a witch's breath from across the fens.

He bustled the younger man into the hall ahead of him and theytook the last two vacant seats at the High Table, braving a flurry offrowns and raised eyebrows for interrupting the Latin grace to do so.

Hall was full tonight. It was always more popular with theundergraduates in the colder months. More unusually, the hall wascandlelit, as it was now only on very few special occasions. Two long,crowded tables stretched off into the glimmering darkness. Bycandlelight, people's faces were more alive, the hushed sounds of theirvoices, the clink of cutlery and glasses, seemed more exciting, and inthe dark recesses of the great hall, all the centuries for which it hadexisted seemed present at once. High Table itself formed a crosspieceat the top, and was raised about a foot above the rest. Since it was aguest night, the table was set on both sides to accommodate the extranumbers, and many diners therefore sat with their backs to the rest ofthe hall.

"So, young MacDuff," said the Professor once he was seated andflapping his napkin open, "pleasure to see you again, my dear fellow.Glad you could come. No idea what all this is about," he added, peeringround the hall in consternation. "All the candles and silver and business. Generally means a special dinner in honour of someone orsomething no one can remember anything about except that it meansbetter food for a night."

He paused and thought for a moment, and then said, "It seems odd,don't you think, that the quality of the food should vary inverselywith the brightness of the lighting. Makes you wonder what culinaryheights the kitchen staff could rise to if you confined them toperpetual darkness. Could be worth a try, I think. Got some good vaultsin the college that could be turned over to the purpose. I think Ishowed you round them once, hmmm? Nice brickwork."

All this came as something of a relief to his guest. It was thefirst indication his host had given that he had the faintestrecollection who he was. Professor Urban Chronotis, the

RegiusProfessor of Chronology, or “Reg” as he insisted on being called had amemory that he himself had once compared to the Queen AlexandraBirdwing Butterfly, in that it was colourful, flitted prettily hitherand thither, and was now, alas, almost completely extinct.

When he had telephoned with the invitation a few days previously,he had seemed extremely keen to see his former pupil, and yet whenRichard had arrived this evening, a little on the late side,admittedly, the Professor had thrown open the door apparently in anger,had started in surprise on seeing Richard, demanded to know if he washaving emotional problems, reacted in annoyance to being remindedgently that it was now ten years since he had been Richard’s collegetutor, and finally agreed that Richard had indeed come for dinner,whereupon he, the Professor, had started talking rapidly and at lengthabout the history of the college architecture, a sure sign that hismind was elsewhere entirely.

“Reg” had never actually taught Richard, he had only been his college tutor, which meant in short that he had had charge of hisgeneral welfare, told him when the exams were and not to take drugs,and so on. Indeed, it was not entirely clear if Reg had ever taughtanybody at all and what, if anything, he would have taught them. Hisprofessorship was an obscure one, to say the least, and since hedispensed with his lecturing duties by the simple and time-honouredtechnique of presenting all his potential students with an exhaustivelist of books that he knew for a fact had been out of print for thirtyyears, then flying into a tantrum if they failed to find them, no onehad ever discovered the precise nature of his academic discipline. Hehad, of course, long ago taken the precaution of removing the onlyextant copies of the books on his reading list from the university andcollege libraries, as a result of which he had plenty of time to, well,to do whatever it was he did.

Since Richard had always managed to get on reasonably well withthe old fruitcake, he had one day plucked up courage to ask him what,exactly, the Regius Professorship of Chronology was. It had been one ofthose light summery days when the world seems about to burst withpleasure at simply being itself, and Reg had been in anuncharacteristically forthcoming mood as they had walked over thebridge where the River Cam divided the older parts of the college fromthe newer.

“Sinecure, my dear fellow, an absolute sinecure,” he had beamed.”A small amount of money for a very small, or shall we say non?existent, amount of work. That puts me permanently just ahead of thegame, which is a comfortable if frugal place to spend

your life. Irecommend it." He leaned over the edge of the bridge and started topoint out a particular brick that he found interesting. "But what sortof study is it supposed to be?" Richard had pursued. "Is it history?Physics? Philosophy? What?"

"Well," said Reg, slowly, "since you're interested, the chair wasoriginally instituted by King George III, who, as you know, entertaineda number of amusing notions, including the belief that one of the treesin Windsor Great Park was in fact Frederick the Great.

"It was his own appointment, hence "Regius". His own idea aswell, which is somewhat more unusual."

Sunlight played along the River Cam. People in punts happilyshouted at each other to fuck off. Thin natural scientists who had spent months locked away in their rooms growing white and fishlike,emerged blinking into the light. Couples walking along the bank got soexcited about the general wonderfulness of it all that they had to popinside for an hour.

"The poor beleaguered fellow," Reg continued, "George III, Imean, was, as you may know, obsessed with time. Filled the palace withclocks. Wound them incessantly. Sometimes would get up in the middle ofthe night and prowl round the palace in his nightshirt winding clocks.He was very concerned that time continued to go forward, you see. Somany terrible things had occurred in his life that he was terrifiedthat any of them might happen again if time were ever allowed to slipbackwards even for a moment. A very understandable fear, especially ifyou're barking mad, as I'm afraid to say, with the very greatestsympathy for the poor fellow, he undoubtedly was. He appointed me, orrather I should say, my office, this professorship, you understand, thepost that I am now privileged to hold to — where was I? Oh yes. Heinstituted this, er, Chair of Chronology to see if there was anyparticular reason why one thing happened after another and if there wasany way of stopping it. Since the answers to the three questions were, I knew immediately, yes, no, and maybe, I realised I could then take

the rest of my career off."

"And your predecessors?"

"Er, were much of the same mind."

"But who were they?"

"Who were they? Well, splendid fellows of course, splendid to aman. Remind me to tell you about them some day. See that brick?Wordsworth was once sick on that brick. Great man."

All that had been about ten years ago.

Richard glanced around the great dining hall to see what

hadchanged in the time, and the answer was, of course, absolutely nothing.In the dark heights, dimly seen by the flickering candlelight, were theghostly portraits of prime ministers, archbishops, political reformersand poets, any of whom might, in their day, have been sick on that samebrick.

"Well," said Reg, in a loudly confidential whisper, as ifintroducing the subject of nipple-piercing in a nunnery, "I hear you'vesuddenly done very well for yourself, at last, hmmm?"

"Er, well, yes, in fact," said Richard, who was as surprised atthe fact as anybody else, "yes, I have."

Around the table several gazes stiffened on him.

"Computers," he heard somebody whisper dismissively to aneighbour further down the table. The stiff gazes relaxed again, andturned away.

"Excellent," said Reg. "I'm so pleased for you, so pleased."

"Tell me," he went on, and it was a moment before Richardrealised that the Professor wasn't talking to him any more, but hadturned to the right to address his other neighbour, "what's all thisabout, this," he flourished a vague hand over the candles and collegesilver, "…stuff?"

His neighbour, an elderly wizened figure, turned very slowly andlooked at him as if he was rather annoyed at being raised from the deadlike this.

"Coleridge," he said in a thin rasp, "it's the Coleridge Dinneryou old fool." He turned very slowly back until he was facing the frontagain. His name was Cawley, he was a Professor of Archaeology andAnthropology, and it was frequently said of him, behind his back, thathe regarded it not so much as a serious academic study, more as achance to relive his childhood.

"Ah, is it," murmured Reg, "is it?" and turned back to Richard."It's the Coleridge Dinner," he said knowledgeably. "Coleridge was amember of the college, you know," he added after a moment. "Coleridge.Samuel Taylor. Poet. I expect you've heard of him. This is his Dinner.Well, not literally, of course. It would be cold by now." Silence."Here, have some salt."

"Er, thank you, I think I'll wait," said Richard, surprised.There was no food on the table yet.

"Go on, take it," insisted the Professor, proffering him theheavy silver salt cellar.

Richard blinked in bemusement but with an interior shrug hereached to take it. In the moment that he blinked, however, the saltcellar had completely vanished.

He started back in surprise.

"Good one, eh?" said Reg as he retrieved the missing cruet

frombehind the ear of his deathly right-hand neighbour, provoking asurprisingly girlish giggle from somewhere else at the table. Regsmiled impishly. “Very irritating habit, I know. It’s next on my list for giving up after smoking and leeches.”

Well, that was another thing that hadn’t changed. Some peoplepick their noses, others habitually beat up old ladies on the streets.Reg’s vice was a harmless if peculiar one — an addiction to childishconjuring tricks. Richard remembered the first time he had been to seeReg with a problem — it was only the normal Angst that periodicallytakes undergraduates into its grip, particularly when they have essaysto write, but it had seemed a dark and savage weight at the time. Reghad sat and listened to his outpourings with a deep frown ofconcentration, and when at last Richard had finished, he ponderedseriously, stroked his chin a lot, and at last leaned forward andlooked him in the eye.

“I suspect that your problem,” he said, “is that you have toomany paper clips up your nose.”

Richard stared at him.

“Allow me to demonstrate,” said Reg, and leaning across the deskhe pulled from Richard’s nose a chain of eleven paper clips and a smallrubber swan.

“Ah, the real culprit,” he said, holding up the swan. “They comein cereal packets, you know, and cause no end of trouble. Well, I’mglad we’ve had this little chat, my dear fellow. Please feel free todisturb me again if you have any more such problems.”

Needless to say, Richard didn’t.

Richard glanced around the table to see if there was anybody elsehe recognised from his time at the college.

Two places away to the left was the don who had been Richard’sDirector of Studies in English, who showed no signs of recognising himat all. This was hardly surprising since Richard had spent his threeyears here assiduously avoiding him, often to the extent of growing abeard and pretending to be someone else.

Next to him was a man whom Richard had never managed to identify.Neither, in fact, had anyone else. He was thin and vole-like and hadthe most extraordinarily long bony nose — it really was very, verylong and bony indeed. In fact it looked a lot like the controversialkeel which had helped the Australians win the America’s Cup in 1983,and this resemblance had been much remarked upon at the time, thoughnot of course to his face. No one had said anything to his face at all.

No one.

Ever.

Anyone meeting him for the first time was too startled

andembarrassed by his nose to speak, and the second time was worse becauseof the first time, and so on. Years had gone by now, seventeen in all.In all that time he had been cocooned in silence. In hall it had longbeen the habit of the college servants to position a separate set ofsalt, pepper and mustard on either side of him, since no one could askhim to pass them, and to ask someone sitting on the other side of himwas not only rude but completely impossible because of his nose beingin the way.

The other odd thing about him was a series of gestures he madeand repeated regularly throughout every evening. They consisted oftapping each of the fingers of his left hand in order, and then one ofthe fingers of his right hand. He would then occasionally tap someother part of his body, a knuckle, an elbow or a knee. Whenever he wasforced to stop this by the requirements of eating he would startblinking each of his eyes instead, and occasionally nodding. No one, ofcourse, had ever dared to ask him why he did this, though all wereconsumed with curiosity.

Richard couldn't see who was sitting beyond him.

In the other direction, beyond Reg's deathly neighbour, wasWatkin, the Classics Professor, a man of terrifying dryness and oddity.His heavy rimless glasses were almost solid cubes of glass within whichhis eyes appeared to lead independent existences like goldfish. Hisnose was straight enough and ordinary, but beneath it he wore the samebeard as Clint Eastwood. His eyes gazed swimmingly around the table ashe selected who was going to be spoken at tonight. He had thought thathis prey might be one of the guests, the newly appointed Head of RadioThree, who was sitting opposite — but unfortunately he had alreadybeen ensnared by the Music Director of the college and a Professor ofPhilosophy. These two were busy explaining to the harassed man that thephrase "too much Mozart" was, given any reasonable definition of thosethree words, an inherently self-contradictory expression, and that anysentence which contained such a phrase would be thereby renderedmeaningless and could not, consequently, be advanced as part of anargument in favour of any given programme-scheduling strategy. The poorman was already beginning to grip his cutlery too tightly. His eyesdarted about desperately looking for rescue, and made the mistake oflighting on those of Watkin.

"Good evening," said Watkin with smiling charm, nodding in themost friendly way, and then letting his gaze settle glassily on to hisbowl of newly arrived soup, from which position it would not allowitself to be moved. Yet. Let the bugger suffer a little. He

wanted therescue to be worth at least a good half dozen radio talk fees.

Beyond Watkin, Richard suddenly discovered the source of thelittle girlish giggle that had greeted Reg's conjuring trick.Astonishingly enough it was a little girl. She was about eight yearsold with blonde hair and a glum look. She was sitting occasionallykicking pettishly at the table leg.

"Who's that?" Richard asked Reg in surprise.

"Who's what?" Reg asked Richard in surprise.

Richard inclined a finger surreptitiously in her direction. "Thegirl," he whispered, "the very, very little girl. Is it some new mathsprofessor?"

Reg peered round at her. "Do you know," he said in astonishment,"I haven't the faintest idea. Never known anything like it. Howextraordinary."

At that moment the problem was solved by the man from the BBC,who suddenly wrenched himself out of the logical half-nelson into whichhis neighbours had got him, and told the girl off for kicking thetable. She stopped kicking the table, and instead kicked the air withredoubled vigour. He told her to try and enjoy herself, so she kickedhim. This did something to bring a brief glimmer of pleasure into herglum evening, but it didn't last. Her father briefly shared with thetable at large his feelings about baby-sitters who let people down, butnobody felt able to run with the topic.

"A major season of Buxtehude," resumed the Director of Music, "isof course clearly long overdue. I'm sure you'll be looking forward toremedying this situation at the first opportunity."

"Oh, er, yes," replied the girl's father, spilling his soup, "er,that is…he's not the same one as Gluck, is he?"

The little girl kicked the table leg again. When her fatherlooked sternly at her, she put her head on one side and mouthed aquestion at him.

"Not now," he insisted at her as quietly as he could.

"When, then?"

"Later. Maybe. Later, we'll see."

She hunched grumpily back in her seat. "You always say later,"she mouthed at him.

"Poor child," murmured Reg. "There isn't a don at this table whodoesn't behave exactly like that inside. Ah, thank you." Their souparrived, distracting his attention, and Richard's.

"So tell me," said Reg, after they had both had a couple ofspoonsful and arrived independently at the same conclusion,

that it wasnot a taste explosion, “what you’ve been up to, my dear chap. Somethingto do with computers, I understand, and also to do with music. Ithought you read English when you were here — though only, I realise,in your spare time.” He looked at Richard significantly over the rim ofhis soup spoon. “Now wait,” he interrupted before Richard even had achance to start, “don’t I vaguely remember that you had some sort ofcomputer when you were here? When was it? 1977?”

“Well, what we called a computer in 1977 was really a kind ofelectric abacus, but…”

“Oh, now, don’t underestimate the abacus,” said Reg. “In skilledhands it’s a very sophisticated calculating device. Furthermore itrequires no power, can be made with any materials you have to hand, andnever goes bing in the middle of an important piece of work.”

“So an electric one would be particularly pointless,” saidRichard.

“True enough,” conceded Reg.

“There really wasn’t a lot this machine could do that youcouldn’t do yourself in half the time with a lot less trouble,” saidRichard, “but it was, on the other hand, very good at being a slow anddim — witted pupil.”

Reg looked at him quizzically.

“I had no idea they were supposed to be in short supply,” hesaid. “I could hit a dozen with a bread roll from where I’m sitting.”

“I’m sure. But look at it this way. What really is the point oftrying to teach anything to anybody?”

This question seemed to provoke a murmur of sympathetic approvalfrom up and down the table.

Richard continued, “What I mean is that if you really want tounderstand something, the best way is to try and explain it to someoneelse. That forces you to sort it out in your own mind. And the moreslow and dim-witted your pupil, the more you have to break things downinto more and more simple ideas. And that’s really the essence ofprogramming. By the time you’ve sorted out a complicated idea intolittle steps that even a stupid machine can deal with, you’ve certainlylearned something about it yourself. The teacher usually learns morethan the pupil. Isn’t that true?”

“It would be hard to learn much less than my pupils,” came a lowgrowl from somewhere on the table, “without undergoing a pre-frontallobotomy.”

“So I used to spend days struggling to write essays on this 16Kmachine that would have taken a couple of hours on a

typewriter, butwhat was fascinating to me was the process of trying to explain to themachine what it was I wanted it to do. I virtually wrote my own wordprocessor in BASIC. A simple search and replace routine would takeabout three hours."

"I forget, did you ever get any essays done at all?"

"Well, not as such. No actual essays, but the reasons why notwere absolutely fascinating. For instance, I discovered that…"

He broke off, laughing at himself.

"I was also playing keyboards in a rock group, of course," headded. "That didn't help."

"Now, that I didn't know," said Reg. "Your past has murkierthings in it than I dreamed possible. A quality, I might add, that itshares with this soup." He wiped his mouth with his napkin verycarefully. "I must go and have a word with the kitchen staff one day. Iwould like to be sure that they are keeping the right bits and throwingthe proper bits away. So. A rock group, you say. Well, well, well. Goodheavens."

"Yes," said Richard. "We called ourselves The Reasonably GoodBand, but in fact we weren't. Our intention was to be the Beatles ofthe early eighties, but we got much better financial and legal advicethan the Beatles ever did, which was basically "Don't bother", so wedidn't. I left Cambridge and starved for three years."

"But didn't I bump into you during that period," said Reg, "andyou said you were doing very well?"

"As a road sweeper, yes. There was an awful lot of mess on theroads. More than enough, I felt, to support an entire career. However,I got the sack for sweeping the mess on to another sweeper's patch."

Reg shook his head. "The wrong career for you, I'm sure. Thereare plenty of vocations where such behaviour would ensure rapidpreferment."

"I tried a few — none of them much grander, though. And I keptnone of them very long, because I was always too tired to do themproperly. I'd be found asleep slumped over the chicken sheds or filingcabinets — depending on what the job was. Been up all night with thecomputer you see, teaching it to play "Three Blind Mice". It was animportant goal for me."

"I'm sure," agreed Reg. "Thank you," he said to the collegeservant who took his half-finished plate of soup from him, "thank youvery much. "Three Blind Mice", eh? Good. Good. So no doubt yousucceeded eventually, and this accounts for your present celebratedstatus. Yes?"

"Well, there's a bit more to it than that."

“I feared there might be. Pity you didn’t bring it with youthough. It might have cheered up the poor young lady who is currentlyhaving our dull and crusty company forced upon her. A swift burst of”Three Blind Mice” would probably do much to revive her spirits.” Heleaned forward to look past his two right-hand neighbours at the girl,who was still sitting sagging in her chair.

“Hello,” he said.

She looked up in surprise, and then dropped her eyes shyly,swinging her legs again.

“Which do you think is worse,” enquired Reg, “the soup or thecompany?”

She gave a tiny, reluctant laugh and shrugged, still lookingdown.

“I think you’re wise not to commit yourself at this stage,”continued Reg. “Myself, I’m waiting to see the carrots before I makeany judgements. They’ve been boiling them since the weekend, but I fearit may not be enough. The only thing that could possibly be worse thanthe carrots is Watkin. He’s the man with the silly glasses sittingbetween us. My name’s Reg, by the way. Come over and kick me when youhave a moment.” The girl giggled and glanced up at Watkin, whostiffened and made an appallingly unsuccessful attempt to smile good -?naturedly.

“Well, little girl,” he said to her awkwardly, and she had desperately to suppress a hoot of laughter at his glasses. Littleconversation therefore ensued, but the girl had an ally, and began toenjoy herself a tiny little bit. Her father gave her a relieved smile.

Reg turned back to Richard, who said, suddenly, “Do you have anyfamily?”

“Er…no,” said Reg, quietly. “But tell me. After “Three BlindMice”, what then?”

“Well, to cut a long story short, Reg, I ended up working forWayForward Technologies…”

“Ah, yes, the famous Mr Way. Tell me, what’s he like?”

Richard was always faintly annoyed by this question, probablybecause he was asked it so often.

“Both better and worse than he’s represented in the press. I likehim a lot, actually. Like any driven man he can be a bit trying attimes, but I’ve known him since the very early days of the company whenneither he nor I had a bean to our names. He’s fine. It’s just thatit’s a good idea not to let him have your phone number unless youpossess an industrial-grade answering machine.”

“What? Why’s that?”

“Well, he’s one of those people who can only think when he’stalking. When he has ideas, he has to talk them out to whoever willlisten. Or, if the people themselves are not available, which isincreasingly the case, their answering machines will do just as well.He just phones them up and talks at them. He has one secretary whosesole job is to collect tapes from people he might have phoned,transcribe them, sort them and give him the edited text the next day ina blue folder.”

“A blue one, eh?”

“Ask me why he doesn’t simply use a tape recorder,” said Richardwith a shrug.

Reg considered this. “I expect he doesn’t use a tape recorderbecause he doesn’t like talking to himself,” he said. “There is a logicthere. Of a kind.”

He took a mouthful of his newly arrived porc au poivre andruminated on it for a while before gently laying his knife and forkaside again for the moment.

“So what,” he said at last, “is the role of young MacDuff in allthis?”

“Well, Gordon assigned me to write a major piece of software forthe Apple Macintosh. Financial spreadsheet, accounting, that sort ofthing, powerful, easy to use, lots of graphics. I asked him exactlywhat he wanted in it, and he just said, “Everything. I want the toppiece of all-singing, all-dancing business software for that machine.”And being of a slightly whimsical turn of mind I took him literally.

“You see, a pattern of numbers can represent anything you like,can be used to map any surface, or modulate any dynamic process — andso on. And any set of company accounts are, in the end, just a patternof numbers. So I sat down and wrote a program that’ll take thosenumbers and do what you like with them. If you just want a bar graphit’ll do them as a bar graph, if you want them as a pie chart orscatter graph it’ll do them as a pie chart or scatter graph. If youwant dancing girls jumping out of the pie chart in order to distractattention from the figures the pie chart actually represents, then theprogram will do that as well. Or you can turn your figures into, forinstance, a flock of seagulls, and the formation they fly in and theway in which the wings of each gull beat will be determined by theperformance of each division of your company. Great for producing animated corporate logos that actually mean something.

“But the silliest feature of all was that if you wanted yourcompany accounts represented as a piece of music, it could

do that aswell. Well, I thought it was silly. The corporate world went bananasover it."

Reg regarded him solemnly from over a piece of carrot poiseddelicately on his fork in front of him, but did not interrupt.

"You see, any aspect of a piece of music can be expressed as asequence or pattern of numbers," enthused Richard. "Numbers can expressthe pitch of notes, the length of notes, patterns of pitches andlengths."

"You mean tunes," said Reg. The carrot had not moved yet.

Richard grinned.

"Tunes would be a very good word for it. I must remember that."

"It would help you speak more easily." Reg returned the carrot tohis plate, untasted. "And this software did well, then?" he asked.

"Not so much here. The yearly accounts of most British companiesemerged sounding like the Dead March from Saul, but in Japan they wentfor it like a pack of rats. It produced lots of cheery company anthemsthat started well, but if you were going to criticise you'd probablysay that they tended to get a bit loud and squeaky at the end. Didspectacular business in the States, which was the main thing,commercially. Though the thing that's interesting me most now is whathappens if you leave the accounts out of it. Turn the numbers thatrepresent the way a swallow's wings beat directly into music. Whatwould you hear? Not the sound of cash registers, according to Gordon."

"Fascinating," said Reg, "quite fascinating," and popped thecarrot at last into his mouth. He turned and leaned forward to speak tohis new girlfriend.

"Watkin loses," he pronounced. "The carrots have achieved a newall — time low. Sorry, Watkin, but awful as you are, the carrots, I'mafraid, are world-beaters."

The girl giggled more easily than last time and she smiled athim. Watkin was trying to take all this good-naturedly, but it wasclear as his eyes swam at Reg that he was more used to discomfitingthan being discomfited.

"Please, Daddy, can I now?" With her new-found, if slight,confidence, the girl had also found a voice.

"Later," insisted her father.

"This is already later. I've been timing it."

"Well…" He hesitated, and was lost.

"We've been to Greece," announced the girl in a small but awedvoice.

"Ah, have you indeed," said Watkin, with a little nod.

“Well,well. Anywhere in particular, or just Greece generally?”

“Patmos,” she said decisively. “It was beautiful. I think Patmosis the most beautiful place in the whole world. Except the ferry nevercame when it said it would. Never, ever. I timed it. We missed ourflight but I didn’t mind.”

“Ah, Patmos, I see,” said Watkin, who was clearly roused by thenews. “Well, what you have to understand, young lady, is that theGreeks, not content with dominating the culture of the Classical world,are also responsible for the greatest, some would say the only, work oftrue creative imagination produced this century as well. I refer ofcourse to the Greek ferry timetables. A work of the sublimest fiction.Anyone who has travelled in the Aegean will confirm this. Hmm, yes. Ithink so.”

She frowned at him.

“I found a pot,” she said.

“Probably nothing,” interrupted her father hastily. “You know theway it is. Everyone who goes to Greece for the first time thinksthey’ve found a pot, don’t they? Ha, ha.”

There were general nods. This was true. Irritating, but true.

“I found it in the harbour,” she said, “in the water. While wewere waiting for the damn ferry.”

“Sarah! I’ve told you…”

“It’s just what you called it. And worse. You called it words Ididn’t think you knew. Anyway, I thought that if everyone here wasmeant to be so clever, then someone would be able to tell me if it wasa proper ancient Greek thing or not. I think it’s very old. Will youplease let them see it, Daddy?”

Her father shrugged hopelessly and started to fish about underhis chair.

“Did you know, young lady,” said Watkin to her, “that the Book ofRevelation was written on Patmos? It was indeed. By Saint John theDivine, as you know. To me it shows very clear signs of having beenwritten while waiting for a ferry. Oh, yes, I think so. It starts off,doesn’t it, with that kind of dreaminess you get when you’re killingtime, getting bored, you know, just making things up, and thengradually grows to a sort of climax of hallucinatory despair. I findthat very suggestive. Perhaps you should write a paper on it.” Henodded at her.

She looked at him as if he were mad.

“Well, here it is,” said her father, plonking the thing down onthe table. “Just a pot, as you see. She’s only six,” he added with agrim smile, “aren’t you, dear?”

“Seven,” said Sarah.

The pot was quite small, about five inches high and four

inchesacross at its widest point. The body was almost spherical, with a verynarrow neck extending about an inch above the body. The neck and abouthalf of the surface area were encrusted with hard-caked earth, but theparts of the pot that could be seen were of a rough, ruddy texture.

Sarah took it and thrust it into the hands of the don sitting onher right.

“You look clever,” she said. “Tell me what you think.”

The don took it, and turned it over with a slightly superciliousair. “I’m sure if you scraped away the mud from the bottom,” heremarked wittily, “it would probably say “Made in Birmingham”.”

“That old, eh?” said Sarah’s father with a forced laugh. “Longtime since anything was made there.”

“Anyway,” said the don, “not my field, I’m a molecular biologist.Anyone else want to have a look?”

This question was not greeted with wild yelps of enthusiasm, butnevertheless the pot was passed from hand to hand around the far end ofthe table in a desultory fashion. It was goggled at through pebbleglasses, peered at through horn-rims, gazed at over half-moons, andsquinted at by someone who had left his glasses in his other suit,which he very much feared had now gone to the cleaner’s. No one seemedto know how old it was, or to care very much. The young girl’s facebegan to grow downhearted again.

“Sour lot,” said Reg to Richard. He picked up a silver saltcellar again and held it up.

“Young lady,” he said, leaning forward to address her.

“Oh, not again, you old fool,” muttered the aged archaeologist Cawley, sitting back and putting his hands over his ears.

“Young lady,” repeated Reg, “regard this simple silver saltcellar. Regard this simple hat.”

“You haven’t got a hat,” said the girl sulkily.

“Oh,” said Reg, “a moment please,” and he went and fetched hiswoolly red one.

“Regard,” he said again, “this simple silver salt cellar. Regardthis simple woolly hat. I put the salt cellar in the hat, thus, and Ipass the hat to you. The next part of the trick, dear lady…is up toyou.”

He handed the hat to her, past their two intervening neighbours,Cawley and Watkin. She took the hat and looked inside it.

“Where’s it gone?” she asked, staring into the hat.

“It’s wherever you put it,” said Reg.

“Oh,” said Sarah, “I see. Well…that wasn’t very good.”

Reg shrugged. “A humble trick, but it gives me pleasure,” hesaid, and turned back to Richard. “Now, what were we talking about?”

Richard looked at him with a slight sense of shock. He knew thatthe Professor had always been prone to sudden and erratic mood swings,but it was as if all the warmth had drained out of him in an instant. He now wore the same distracted expression Richard had seen on his facewhen first he had arrived at his door that evening, apparentlycompletely unexpected. Reg seemed then to sense that Richard was takenaback and quickly reassembled a smile.

“My dear chap!” he said. “My dear chap! My dear, dear chap! Whatwas I saying?”

“Er, you were saying “My dear chap”.”

“Yes, but I feel sure it was a prelude to something. A sort ofshort toccata on the theme of what a splendid fellow you are prior tointroducing the main subject of my discourse, the nature of which Icurrently forget. You have no idea what I was about to say?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose I should be pleased. If everyone knewexactly what I was going to say, then there would be no point in mysaying it, would there? Now, how’s our young guest’s pot doing?”

In fact it had reached Watkin, who pronounced himself no experton what the ancients had made for themselves to drink out of, only onwhat they had written as a result. He said that Cawley was the one towhose knowledge and experience they should all bow, and attempted togive the pot to him.

“I said,” he repeated, “yours was the knowledge and experience towhich we should bow. Oh, for heaven’s sake, take your hands off yourears and have a look at the thing.”

Gently, but firmly, he drew Cawley’s right hand from his ear,explained the situation to him once again, and handed him the pot.Cawley gave it a cursory but clearly expert examination.

“Yes,” he said, “about two hundred years old, I would think. Veryrough. Very crude example of its type. Utterly without value, ofcourse.”

He put it down peremptorily and gazed off into the old minstrelgallery, which appeared to anger him for some reason.

The effect on Sarah was immediate. Already discouraged, she wasthoroughly downcast by this. She bit her lip and threw herself backagainst her chair, feeling once again thoroughly out of place andchildish. Her father gave her a warning look about

misbehaving, andthen apologised for her again.

"Well, Buxtehude," he hurried on to say, "yes, good old Buxtehude. We'll have to see what we can do. Tell me…"

"Young lady," interrupted a voice, hoarse with astonishment, "youare clearly a magician and enchantress of prodigious powers!"

All eyes turned to Reg, the old show-off. He was gripping the potand staring at it with manic fascination. He turned his eyes slowly tothe little girl, as if for the first time assessing the power of afeared adversary.

"I bow to you," he whispered. "I, unworthy though I am to speakin the presence of such a power as yours, beg leave to congratulate youon one of the finest feats of the conjurer's art it has been myprivilege to witness!"

Sarah stared at him with widening eyes.

"May I show these people what you have wrought?" he askedearnestly.

Very faintly she nodded, and he fetched her formerly precious,but now sadly discredited, pot a sharp rap on the table.

It split into two irregular parts, the caked clay with which itwas surrounded falling in jagged shards on the table. One side of thepot fell away, leaving the rest standing.

Sarah's eyes goggled at the stained and tarnished but clearlyrecognisable silver college salt cellar, standing jammed in the remainsof the pot.

"Stupid old fool," muttered Cawley.

After the general disparagement and condemnation of this cheapparlour trick had died down — none of which could dim the awe inSarah's eyes — Reg turned to Richard and said, idly:

"Who was that friend of yours when you were here, do you ever seehim? Chap with an odd East European name. Svlad something. SvladCjelli. Remember the fellow?"

Richard looked at him blankly for a moment.

"Svlad?" he said. "Oh, you mean Dirk. Dirk Cjelli. No. I neverstayed in touch. I've bumped into him a couple of times in the streetbut that's all. I think he changes his name from time to time. Why doyou ask?"

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CHAPTER 5

High on his rocky promontory the Electric Monk continued to siton a horse which was going quietly and uncomplainingly spare. Fromunder its rough woven cowl the Monk gazed unblinkingly down into thevalley, with which it was having a problem, but the problem was a newand hideous one to the Monk, for it was this — Doubt.

He never suffered it for long, but when he did, it gnawed at thevery root of his being.

The day was hot; the sun stood in an empty hazy sky and beat downupon the grey rocks and the scrubby, parched grass. Nothing moved, noteven the Monk. But strange things were beginning to fizz in its brain,as they did from time to time when a piece of data became misaddressedas it passed through its input buffer.

But then the Monk began to believe, fitfully and nervously atfirst, but then with a great searing white flame of belief whichoverturned all previous beliefs, including the stupid one about thevalley being pink, that somewhere down in the valley, about a mile fromwhere he was sitting, there would shortly open up a mysterious doorwayinto a strange and distant world, a doorway through which he mightenter. An astounding idea.

Astoundingly enough, however, on this one occasion he wasperfectly right.

The horse sensed that something was up.

It pricked up its ears and gently shook its head. It had goneinto a sort of trance looking at the same clump of rocks for so long,and was on the verge of imagining them to be pink itself. It shook itshead a little harder.

A slight twitch on the reins, and a prod from the Monk's heelsand they were off, picking their way carefully down the rocky incline.The way was difficult. Much of it was loose shale — loose brown andgrey shale, with the occasional brown and green plant clinging to aprecarious existence on it. The Monk noticed this withoutembarrassment. It was an older, wiser Monk now, and had put childishthings behind it. Pink valleys, hermaphrodite tables, these were allnatural stages through which one had to pass on the path to trueenlightenment.

The sun beat hard on them. The Monk wiped the sweat and dust offits face and paused, leaning forward on the horse's neck. It peereddown through the shimmering heat haze at a large outcrop of rock whichstood out on to the floor of the valley. There, behind that outcrop,was where the Monk thought, or

rather passionately believed to the coreof its being, the door would appear. It tried to focus more closely,but the details of the view swam confusingly in the hot rising air.

As it sat back in its saddle, and was about to prod the horseonward, it suddenly noticed a rather odd thing.

On a flattish wall of rock nearby, in fact so nearby that theMonk was surprised not to have noticed it before, was a large painting.The painting was crudely drawn, though not without a certain stylishsweep of line, and seemed very old, possibly very, very old indeed. Thepaint was faded, chipped and patchy, and it was difficult to discernwith any clarity what the picture was. The Monk approached the picturemore closely. It looked like a primitive hunting scene.

The group of purple, multi-limbed creatures were clearly earlyhunters. They carried rough spears, and were in hot pursuit of a largehorned and armoured creature, which appeared to have been wounded inthe hunt already. The colours were now so dim as to be almost non -?existent. In fact, all that could be clearly seen was the white of thehunters' teeth, which seemed to shine with a whiteness whose lustre wasundimmed by the passage of what must have been many thousands of years.In fact they even put the Monk's own teeth to shame, and he had cleanedthem only that morning.

The Monk had seen paintings like this before, but only inpictures or on the TV, never in real life. They were usually to befound in caves where they were protected from the elements, otherwisethey would not have survived.

The Monk looked more carefully at the immediate environs of therock wall and noticed that, though not exactly in a cave, it wasnevertheless protected by a large overhang and was well sheltered fromthe wind and rain. Odd, though, that it should have managed to last solong. Odder still that it should appear not to have been discovered.Such cave paintings as there were were all famous and familiar images,but this was not one that he had ever seen before.

Perhaps this was a dramatic and historic find he had made.Perhaps if he were to return to the city and announce this discovery hewould be welcomed back, given a new motherboard after all and allowedto believe — to believe — believe what? He paused, blinked, and shookhis head to clear a momentary system error.

He pulled himself up short.

He believed in a door. He must find that door. The door was the way to…to…

The Door was The Way.

Good.

Capital letters were always the best way of dealing with thingsyou didn't have a good answer to.

Brusquely he tugged the horse's head round and urged it onwardand downward. Within a few minutes more of tricky manoeuvring they hadreached the valley floor, and he was momentarily disconcerted todiscover that the fine top layer of dust that had settled on the brownparched earth was indeed a very pale brownish pink, particularly on thebanks of the sluggish trickle of mud which was all that remained, inthe hot season, of the river that flowed through the valley when therains came. He dismounted and bent down to feel the pink dust and runit through his fingers. It was very fine and soft and felt pleasant ashe rubbed it on his skin. It was about the same colour, perhaps alittle paler.

The horse was looking at him. He realised, a little belatedlyperhaps, that the horse must be extremely thirsty. He was extremelythirsty himself, but had tried to keep his mind off it. He unbuckledthe water flask from the saddle. It was pathetically light. Heunscrewed the top and took one single swig. Then he poured a littleinto his cupped hand and offered it to the horse, who slurped at itgreedily and briefly.

The horse looked at him again.

The Monk shook his head sadly, resealed the bottle and replacedit. He knew, in that small part of his mind where he kept factual andlogical information, that it would not last much longer, and that,without it, neither would they. It was only his Belief that kept himgoing, currently his Belief in The Door.

He brushed the pink dust from his rough habit, and then stoodlooking at the rocky outcrop, a mere hundred yards distant. He lookedat it not without a slight, tiny trepidation. Although the major partof his mind was firm in its eternal and unshakeable Belief that there would be a Door behind the outcrop, and that the Door would be The Way,yet the tiny part of his brain that understood about the water bottlecould not help but recall past disappointments and sounded a very tinybut jarring note of caution.

If he elected not to go and see The Door for himself, then hecould continue to believe in it forever. It would be the lodestone of his life (what little was left of it, said the part of his brain thatknew about the water bottle).

If on the other hand he went to pay his respects to the Door andit wasn't there…what then?

The horse whinnied impatiently.

The answer, of course, was very simple. He had a whole board ofcircuits for dealing with exactly this problem, in fact this was thevery heart of his function. He would continue to believe in it whateverthe facts turned out to be, what else was the meaning of Belief?

The Door would still be there, even if the door was not.

He pulled himself together. The Door would be there, and he mustnow go to it, because The Door was The Way.

Instead of remounting his horse, he led it. The Way was but ashort way, and he should enter the presence of the Door in humility.

He walked, brave and erect, with solemn slowness. He approachedthe rocky outcrop. He reached it. He turned the corner. He looked.

The Door was there.

The horse, it must be said, was quite surprised.

The Monk fell to his knees in awe and bewilderment. So braced was he for dealing with the disappointment that was habitually his lotthat, though he would never know to admit it, he was completelyunprepared for this. He stared at The Door in sheer, blank systemerror.

It was a door such as he had never seen before. All the doors he knew were great steel-reinforced things, because of all the videorecorders and dishwashers that were kept behind them, plus of courseall the expensive Electric Monks that were needed to believe in it all.This one was simple, wooden and small, about his own size. A Monk-sizedoor, painted white, with a single, slightly dented brass knob slightlyless than halfway up one side. It was set simply in the rock face, withno explanation as to its origin or purpose.

Hardly knowing how he dared, the poor startled Monk staggered tohis feet and, leading his horse, walked nervously forward towards it.He reached out and touched it. He was so startled when no alarms went off that he jumped back. He touched it again, more firmly this time.

He let his hand drop slowly to the handle — again, no alarms. Hewaited to be sure, and then he turned it, very, very gently. He felt amechanism release. He held his breath. Nothing. He drew the doortowards him, and it came easily. He looked inside, but the interior wasso dim in contrast with the desert sun outside that he could see nothing. At last, almost dead with wonder, he entered, pulling thehorse in after him.

A few minutes later, a figure that had been sitting out of

sightaround the next outcrop of rock finished rubbing dust on his face,stood up, stretched his limbs and made his way back towards the door,patting his clothes as he did so.

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CHAPTER 6

“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan A stately pleasure-dome decree:”

The reader clearly belonged to the school of thought which holdsthat a sense of the seriousness or greatness of a poem is best impartedby reading it in a silly voice. He soared and swooped at the wordsuntil they seemed to duck and run for cover.

“Where Alph, the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.”

Richard relaxed back into his seat. The words were very, veryfamiliar to him, as they could not help but be to any English graduateof St Cedd’s College, and they settled easily into his mind.

The association of the college with Coleridge was taken veryseriously indeed, despite the man’s well-known predilection for certainrecreational pharmaceuticals under the influence of which this, hisgreatest work, was composed, in a dream.

The entire manuscript was lodged in the safe-keeping of thecollege library, and it was from this itself, on the regular occasionof the Coleridge Dinner, that the poem was read.

“So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.”

Richard wondered how long it took. He glanced sideways at hisformer Director of Studies and was disturbed by the sturdypurposefulness of his reading posture. The singsong voice irritated himat first, but after a while it began to lull him instead, and hewatched a rivulet of wax seeping over the edge of a candle that wasburning low now and throwing a guttering light over the carnage ofdinner.

“But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!”

The small quantities of claret that he had allowed himself duringthe course of the meal seeped warmly through his veins, and soon hisown mind began to wander, and provoked by Reg’s question earlier in themeal, he wondered what had lately become

of his former…was friend theword? He seemed more like a succession of extraordinary events than aperson. The idea of him actually having friends as such seemed not somuch unlikely, more a sort of mismatching of concepts, like the idea ofthe Suez crisis popping out for a bun.

Svlad Cjelli. Popularly known as Dirk, though, again, “popular”was hardly right. Notorious, certainly; sought after, endlesslyspeculated about, those too were true. But popular? Only in the sensethat a serious accident on the motorway might be popular — everyoneslows down to have a good look, but no one will get too close to theflames. Infamous was more like it. Svlad Cjelli, infamously known asDirk.

He was rounder than the average undergraduate and wore more hats.That is to say, there was just the one hat which he habitually wore,but he wore it with a passion that was rare in one so young. The hatwas dark red and round, with a very flat brim, and it appeared to moveas if balanced on gimbals, which ensured its perfect horizontality atall times, however its owner moved his head. As a hat it was aremarkable rather than entirely successful piece of persona!decoration. It would make an elegant adornment, stylish, shapely andflattering, if the wearer were a small bedside lamp, but not otherwise.

People gravitated around him, drawn in by the stories he deniedabout himself, but what the source of these stories might be, if nothis own denials, was never entirely clear.

The tales had to do with the psychic powers that he’d supposedlyinherited from his mother’s side of the family who he claimed, hadlived at the smarter end of Transylvania. That is to say, he didn’tmake any such claim at all, and said it was the most absurd nonsense.He strenuously denied that there were bats of any kind at all in hisfamily and threatened to sue anybody who put about such maliciousfabrications, but he affected nevertheless to wear a large and flappyleather coat, and had one of those machines in his room which are supposed to help cure bad backs if you hang upside down from them. Hewould allow people to discover him hanging from this machine at allkinds of odd hours of the day, and more particularly of the night,expressly so that he could vigorously deny that it had any significancewhatsoever.

By means of an ingenious series of strategically deployed denialsof the most exciting and exotic things, he was able to create the mythhat he was a psychic, mystic, telepathic, fey, clairvoyant,psychosassic vampire bat.

What did “psychosassic” mean?

It was his own word and he vigorously denied that it

meantanything at all.

“And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted…”

Dirk had also been perpetually broke. This would change.

It was his room-mate who started it, a credulous fellow calledMander, who, if the truth were known, had probably been speciallyselected by Dirk for his credulity.

Steve Mander noticed that if ever Dirk went to bed drunk he would talk in his sleep. Not only that, but the sort of things he would sayin his sleep would be things like, “The opening up of trade routes tothe mumble mumble burble was the turning point for the growth of empirein the snore footle mumble. Discuss.”

“…like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:”

The first time this happened Steve Mander sat bolt upright inbed. This was shortly before prelim exams in the second year, and whatDirk had just said, or judiciously mumbled, sounded remarkably like avery likely question in the Economic History paper.

Mander quietly got up, crossed over to Dirk’s bed and listenedvery hard, but other than a few completely disconnected mumblings aboutSchleswig-Holstein and the Franco-Prussian war, the latter beinglargely directed by Dirk into his pillow, he learned nothing more.

News, however, spread — quietly, discreetly, and like wildfire.

“And “mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.”

For the next month Dirk found himself being constantly wined anddined in the hope that he would sleep very soundly that night anddream-speak a few more exam questions. Remarkably, it seemed that thebetter he was fed, and the finer the vintage of the wine he was givento drink, the less he would tend to sleep facing directly into hispillow.

His scheme, therefore, was to exploit his alleged gifts withoutever actually claiming to have them. In fact he would react to storiesabout his supposed powers with open incredulity, even hostility.

“Five miles meandering with a mazy motionThrough wood and dale the sacred river ran, Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:

And “mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!”

Dirk was also, he denied, a clairaudient. He would sometimes humtunes in his sleep that two weeks later would turn out to be a hit forsomeone. Not too difficult to organise, really.

In fact, he had always done the bare minimum of researchnecessary to support these myths. He was lazy, and essentially what hedid was allow people’s enthusiastic credulity to do the work for him.The laziness was essential — if his supposed feats of the paranormalhad been detailed and accurate, then people might have been suspiciousand looked for other explanations. On the other hand, the more vagueand ambiguous his “predictions’ the more other people’s own wishfulthinking would close the credibility gap.

Dirk never made much out of it — at least, he appeared not to.In fact, the benefit to himself, as a student, of being continuallywined and dined at other people’s expense was more considerable thananyone would expect unless they sat down and worked out the figures.

And, of course, he never claimed — in fact, he actively denied ?

-that any of it was even remotely true.

He was therefore well placed to execute a very nice and tastylittle scam come the time of finals.

“The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”

“Good heavens…!” Reg suddenly seemed to awake with a start fromthe light doze into which he had gently slipped under the influence ofthe wine and the reading, and glanced about himself with blanksurprise, but nothing had changed. Coleridge’s words sang through awarm and contented silence that had settled on the great hall. Afteranother quick frown, Reg settled back into another doze, but this timea slightly more attentive one.

“A damsel with a dulcimer In a vision once I saw: It was an Abyssinian maid,And on her dulcimer she played,Singing of Mount Abora.”

Dirk allowed himself to be persuaded to make, under hypnosis, afirm prediction about what questions would be set for examination thatsummer.

He himself first planted the idea by explaining exactly the

sortof thing that he would never, under any circumstances, be prepared todo, though in many ways he would like to, just to have the chance todisprove his alleged and strongly disavowed abilities.

And it was on these grounds, carefully prepared, that heeventually agreed — only because it would once and for all scotch thewhole silly — immensely, tediously silly — business. He would makehis predictions by means of automatic writing under proper supervision, and they would then be sealed in an envelope and deposited at the bankuntil after the exams.

Then they would be opened to see how accurate they had been afterthe exams.

He was, not surprisingly, offered some pretty hefty bribes from apretty hefty number of people to let them see the predictions he hadwritten down, but he was absolutely shocked by the idea. That, he said,would be dishonest…

“Could I revive within me Her symphony and song,To such a deep delight “twould win me,That with music loud and long,I would build that dome in air,That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!”

Then, a short time later, Dirk allowed himself to be seen aroundtown wearing something of a vexed and solemn expression. At first hewaved aside enquiries as to what it was that was bothering him, buteventually he let slip that his mother was going to have to undergosome extremely expensive dental work which, for reasons that he refusedto discuss, would have to be done privately, only there wasn’t themoney.

From here, the path downward to accepting donations for hismother’s supposed medical expenses in return for quick glances at hiswritten exam predictions proved to be sufficiently steep and well-oiledfor him to be able to slip down it with a minimum of fuss.

Then it further transpired that the only dentist who couldperform this mysterious dental operation was an East European surgeonnow living in Malibu, and it was in consequence necessary to increasethe level of donations rather sharply.

He still denied, of course, that his abilities were all that theywere cracked up to be, in fact he denied that they existed at all, andinsisted that he would never have embarked on the exercise at all if it wasn’t to disprove the whole thing — and also, since other peopleseemed, at their own risk, to have a faith in his abilities that hehimself did not, he was happy to indulge them to the extent of lettingthem pay for his sainted mother’s operation.

He could only emerge well from this situation.

Or so he thought.

“And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!”

The exam papers Dirk produced under hypnosis, by means ofautomatic writing, he had, in fact, pieced together simply by doing thesame minimum research that any student taking exams would do, studyingprevious exam papers, and seeing what, if any, patterns emerged, andmaking intelligent guesses about what might come up. He was pretty sureof getting (as anyone would be) a strike rate that was sufficientlyhigh to satisfy the credulous, and sufficiently low for the wholeexercise to look perfectly innocent.

As indeed it was.

What completely blew him out of the water, and caused a furorewhich ended with him being driven out of Cambridge in the back of aBlack Maria, was the fact that all the exam papers he sold turned out

to be the same as the papers that were actually set.Exactly. Word for word. To the very comma.

“Wave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise…”

And that, apart from a flurry of sensational newspaper reportswhich exposed him as a fraud, then trumpeted him as the real thing sothat they could have another round of exposing him as a fraud again andthen trumpeting him as the real thing again, until they got bored andfound a nice juicy snooker player to harass instead, was that.

In the years since then, Richard had run into Dirk from time totime and had usually been greeted with that kind of guarded half smilethat wants to know if you think it owes you money before it blossomsinto one that hopes you will lend it some. Dirk’s regular name changessuggested to Richard that he wasn’t alone in being treated like this.

He felt a tug of sadness that someone who had seemed so shininglyalive within the small confines of a university community should haveseemed to fade so much in the light of common day. And he wondered atReg’s asking after him like that, suddenly and out of the blue, in whatseemed altogether too airy and casual a manner.

He glanced around him again, at his lightly snoring neighbour,Reg; at little Sarah rapt in silent attention; at the deep

hall swathedin darkly glimmering light; at the portraits of old prime ministers andpoets hung high in the darkness with just the odd glint of candlelightgleaming off their teeth; at the Director of English Studies standingreading in his poetry-reading voice; at the book of “Kubla Khan” thatthe Director of English Studies held in his hand; and finally,surreptitiously, at his watch. He settled back again.

The voice continued, reading the second, and altogether strangerpart of the poem…

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CHAPTER 7

This was the evening of the last day of Gordon Way's life, and hewas wondering if the rain would hold off for the weekend. The forecasthad said changeable — a misty night tonight followed by bright butchilly days on Friday and Saturday with maybe a few scattered showerstowards the end of Sunday when everyone would be heading back intotown.

Everyone, that is, other than Gordon Way.

The weather forecast hadn't mentioned that, of course, thatwasn't the job of the weather forecast, but then his horoscope had beenpretty misleading as well. It had mentioned an unusual amount ofplanetary activity in his sign and had urged him to differentiatebetween what he thought he wanted and what he actually needed, andsuggested that he should tackle emotional or work problems withdetermination and complete honesty, but had inexplicably failed tomention that he would be dead before the day was out.

He turned off the motorway near Cambridge and stopped at a smallfilling station for some petrol, where he sat for a moment, finishingoff a call on his car phone.

"OK, look, I'll call you tomorrow," he said, "or maybe latertonight. Or call me. I should be at the cottage in half an hour. Yes, I know how important the project is to you. All right, I know howimportant it is, full stop. You want it, I want it. Of course I do. AndI'm not saying that we won't continue to support it. I'm just sayingit's expensive and we should look at the whole thing with determinationand complete honesty. Look, why don't you come out to the cottage, andwe can talk it through. OK, yeah, yes, I know. I understand. Well,think about it, Kate. Talk to you later. Bye."

He hung up and continued to sit in his car for a moment.

It was a large car. It was a large silver-grey Mercedes of thesort that they use in advertisements, and not just advertisements forMercedes. Gordon Way, brother of Susan, employer of Richard MacDuff,was a rich man, the founder and owner of WayForward Technologies II.WayForward Technologies itself had of course gone bust, for the usualreason, taking his entire first fortune with it.

Luckily, he had managed to make another one.

The "usual reason" was that he had been in the business of computer hardware when every twelve-year-old in the country hadsuddenly got bored with boxes that went bing. His second

fortune hadbeen made in software instead. As a result of two major pieces ofsoftware, one of which was Anthem (the other, more profitable one hadnever seen the light of day), WFT-II was the only British softwarecompany that could be mentioned in the same sentence as such major U.S.companies as Microsoft or Lotus. The sentence would probably run alongthe lines of “WayForward Technologies, unlike such major U.S. companiesas Microsoft or Lotus…” but it was a start. WayForward was in there.And he owned it.

He pushed a tape into the slot on the stereo console. It acceptedit with a soft and decorous click, and a moment or two later Ravel’sBolero floated out of eight perfectly matched speakers with fine -?meshed matte-black grilles. The stereo was so smooth and spacious youcould almost sense the whole ice-rink. He tapped his fingers lightly onthe padded rim of the steering wheel. He gazed at the dashboard.Tasteful illuminated figures and tiny, immaculate lights gazed dimlyback at him. After a while he suddenly realised this was a self servicestation and got out to fill the tank.

This took a minute or two. He stood gripping the filler nozzle,stamping his feet in the cold night air, then walked over to the smallgrubby kiosk, paid for the petrol, remembered to buy a couple of localmaps, and then stood chatting enthusiastically to the cashier for a fewminutes about the directions the computer industry was likely to takein the following year, suggesting that parallel processing was going tobe the key to really intuitive productivity software, but also stronglydoubting whether artificial intelligence research per se, particularlyartificial intelligence research based on the ProLog language, wasreally going to produce any serious commercially viable products in theforeseeable future, at least as far as the office desk top environmentwas concerned, a topic that fascinated the cashier not at all.

“The man just liked to talk,” he would later tell the police.”Man, I could have walked away to the toilet for ten minutes and hewould’ve told it all to the till. If I’d been fifteen minutes the till would have walked away too. Yeah, I’m sure that’s him,” he would addwhen shown a picture of Gordon Way. “I only wasn’t sure at firstbecause in the picture he’s got his mouth closed.”

“And you’re absolutely certain you didn’t see anything elsesuspicious?” the policeman insisted. “Nothing that struck you as odd inany way at all?”

“No, like I said, it was just an ordinary customer on an

ordinary night, just like any other night."

The policeman stared at him blankly. "Just for the sake ofargument," he went on to say, "if I were suddenly to do this…" — hemade himself go cross-eyed, stuck his tongue out of the corner of hismouth and danced up and down twisting his fingers in his ears — "wouldanything strike you about that?"

"Well, er, yeah," said the cashier, backing away nervously. "I'dthink you'd gone stark raving mad."

"Good," said the policeman, putting his notebook away. "It's justthat different people sometimes have a different idea of what "odd"means, you see, sir. If last night was an ordinary night just like anyother night, then I am a pimple on the bottom of the Marquess ofQueensbury's aunt. We shall be requiring a statement later, sir. Thankyou for your time."

That was all yet to come.

Tonight, Gordon pushed the maps in his pocket and strolled backtowards his car. Standing under the lights in the mist it had gathereda finely beaded coat of matte moisture on it, and looked like — well,it looked like an extremely expensive Mercedes-Benz. Gordon caughthimself, just for a millisecond, wishing that he had something likethat, but he was now quite adept at fending off that particular line ofthought, which only led off in circles and left him feeling depressedand confused.

He patted it in a proprietorial manner, then, walking around it,noticed that the boot wasn't closed properly and pushed it shut. Itclosed with a good healthy clunk. Well, that made it all worth it,didn't it? Good healthy clunk like that. Old-fashioned values ofquality and workmanship. He thought of a dozen things he had to talk toSusan about and climbed back into the car, pushing the auto-dial codeon his phone as soon as the car was prowling back on to the road.

"…so if you'd like to leave a message, I'll get back to you assoon as possible. Maybe."

Beep.

"Oh, Susan, hi, it's Gordon," he said, cradling the phoneawkwardly on his shoulder. "Just on my way to the cottage. It's er,Thursday night, and it's, er…8.47. Bit misty on the roads. Listen, Ihave those people from the States coming over this weekend to thrashout the distribution on Anthem Version 2.00, handling the promotion,all that stuff, and look you know I don't like to ask you this sort ofthing, but you know I always do anyway, so here it is.

"I just need to know that Richard is on the case. I mean reallyon the case. I can ask him, and he says, Oh sure, it's fine,

but halfthe time — shit, that lorry had bright lights, none of these bastardlorry drivers ever dips them properly, it's a wonder I don't end updead in the ditch, that would be something, wouldn't it, leaving yourfamous last words on somebody's answering machine, there's no reasonwhy these lorries shouldn't have automatic light-activated dipperswitches. Look, can you make a note for me to tell Susan — not you, ofcourse, secretary Susan at the office — to tell her to send a letterfrom me to that fellow at the Department of the Environment saying wecan provide the technology if he can provide the legislation? It's forthe public good, and anyway he owes me a favour plus what's the pointin having a CBE if you can't kick a little ass? You can tell I've beentalking to Americans all week.

"That reminds me, God, I hope I remembered to pack the shotguns.What is it with these Americans that they're always so mad to shoot myrabbits? I bought them some maps in the hope that I can persuade them to go on long healthy walks and take their minds off shooting rabbits.I really feel quite sorry for the creatures. I think I should put oneof those signs on my lawn when the Americans are coming, you know, likethey have in Beverly Hills, saying "Armed Response".

"Make a note to Susan, would you please, to get an "ArmedResponse" sign made up with a sharp spike on the bottom at the rightheight for rabbits to see. That's secretary Susan at the office notyou, of course.

"Where was I?

"Oh yes. Richard and Anthem 2.00. Susan, that thing has got to bein beta testing in two weeks. He tells me it's fine. But every time Isee him he's got a picture of a sofa spinning on his computer screen.He says it's an important concept, but all I see is furniture. Peoplewho want their company accounts to sing to them do not want to buy arevolving sofa. Nor do I think he should be turning the erosionpatterns of the Himalayas into a flute quintet at this time.

"And as for what Kate's up to, Susan, well, I can't hide the factthat I get anxious at the salaries and computer time it's eating up.Important long-term research and development it might be, but there isalso the possibility, only a possibility, I'm saying, but neverthelessa possibility which I think we owe it to ourselves fully to evaluateand explore, which is that it's a lemon. That's odd, there's a noisecoming from the boot, I thought I'd just closed it properly.

"Anyway, the main thing's Richard. And the point is that there'sonly one person who's really in a position to know if he's

getting theimportant work done, or if he's just dreaming, and that one person is,I'm afraid, Susan.

"That's you, I mean, of course, not secretary Susan at theoffice.

"So can you, I don't like to ask you this, I really don't, canyou really get on his case? Make him see how important it is? Just makesure he realises that WayForward Technologies is meant to be anexpanding commercial business, not an adventure playground for crunch ?

-heads. That's the problem with crunch-heads — they have one greatidea that actually works and then they expect you to carry on fundingthem for years while they sit and calculate the topographies of theirnavels. I'm sorry, I'm going to have to stop and close the bootproperly. Won't be a moment."

He put the telephone down on the seat beside him, pulled over onto the grass verge, and got out. As he went to the boot, it opened, afigure rose out of it, shot him through the chest with both barrels ofa shotgun and then went about its business.

Gordon Way's astonishment at being suddenly shot dead was nothingto his astonishment at what happened next.

Dirk Gently 1 - Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency

CHAPTER 8

“Come in, dear fellow, come in.”

The door to Reg’s set of rooms in college was up a winding set ofwooden stairs in the corner of Second Court, and was not well lit, orrather it was perfectly well lit when the light was working, but thelight was not working, so the door was not well lit and was,furthermore, locked. Reg was having difficulty in finding the key froma collection which looked like something that a fit Ninja warrior couldhurl through the trunk of a tree.

Rooms in the older parts of the college have double doors, like airlocks, and like airlocks they are fiddly to open. The outer door isa sturdy slab of grey painted oak, with no features other than a verynarrow slit for letters, and a Yale lock, to which suddenly Reg at lastfound the key.

He unlocked it and pulled it open. Behind it lay an ordinarywhite — panelled door with an ordinary brass doorknob.

“Come in, come in,” repeated Reg, opening this and fumbling forthe light switch. For a moment only the dying embers of a fire in thestone grate threw ghostly red shadows dancing around the room, but thenelectric light flooded it and extinguished the magic. Reg hesitated onthe threshold for a moment, oddly tense, as if wishing to be sure ofsomething before he entered, then bustled in with at least theappearance of cheeriness.

It was a large panelled room, which a collection of gently shabbyfurniture contrived to fill quite comfortably. Against the far wallstood a large and battered old mahogany table with fat ugly legs, whichwas laden with books, files, folders and teetering piles of papers.Standing in its own space on the desk, Richard was amused to note, wasactually a battered old abacus.

There was a small Regency writing desk standing nearby whichmight have been quite valuable had it not been knocked about so much,also a couple of elegant Georgian chairs, a portentous Victorianbookcase, and so on. It was, in short, a don’s room. It had a don’sframed maps and prints on the walls a threadbare and faded don’s carpeton the floor, and it looked as if little had changed in it for decades,which was probably the case because a don lived in it.

Two doors led out from either end of the opposite wall, andRichard knew from previous visits that one led to a study which lookedmuch like a smaller and more intense version of this room — largerclumps of books, taller piles of paper in more imminent danger ofactually falling, furniture which, however old

and valuable, washeavily marked with myriad rings of hot tea or coffee cups, on many ofwhich the original cups themselves were probably still standing.

The other door led to a small and rather basically equippedkitchen, and a twisty internal staircase at the top of which lay theProfessor's bedroom and bathroom.

"Try and make yourself comfortable on the sofa," invited Reg,fussing around hospitably. "I don't know if you'll manage it. It alwaysfeels to me as if it's been stuffed with cabbage leaves and cutlery."He peered at Richard seriously. "Do you have a good sofa?" he enquired.

"Well, yes." Richard laughed. He was cheered by the silliness ofthe question.

"Oh," said Reg solemnly. "Well, I wish you'd tell me where yougot it. I have endless trouble with them, quite endless. Never found acomfortable one in all my life. How do you find yours?" He encountered,with a slight air of surprise, a small silver tray he had left out witha decanter of port and three glasses.

"Well, it's odd you should ask that," said Richard. "I've neversat on it."

"Very wise," insisted Reg earnestly, "very, very wise." He wentthrough a palaver similar to his previous one with his coat and hat.

"Not that I wouldn't like to," said Richard. "It's just that it'sstuck halfway up a long flight of stairs which leads up into my flat.As far as I can make it out, the delivery men got it part way up thestairs, got it stuck, turned it around any way they could, couldn't getit any further, and then found, curiously enough, that they couldn'tget it back down again. Now, that should be impossible."

"Odd," agreed Reg. "I've certainly never come across anyirreversible mathematics involving sofas. Could be a new field. Haveyou spoken to any spatial geometricians?"

"I did better than that. I called in a neighbour's kid who usedto be able to solve Rubik's cube in seventeen seconds. He sat on a stepand stared at it for over an hour before pronouncing it irrevocablystuck. Admittedly he's a few years older now and has found out aboutgirls, but it's got me puzzled."

"Carry on talking, my dear fellow, I'm most interested, but letme know first if there's anything I can get you. Port perhaps? Orbrandy? The port I think is the better bet, laid down by the college in1934, one of the finest vintages I think you'll find, and on the otherhand I don't actually have any brandy. Or coffee? Some more wineperhaps? There's an excellent Margaux I've been

looking for an excuseto open, though it should of course be allowed to stand open for anhour or two, which is not to say that I couldn't…no," he saidhurriedly, "probably best not to go for the Margaux tonight."

"Tea is what I would really like," said Richard, "if you havesome."

Reg raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"I have to drive home."

"Indeed. Then I shall be a moment or two in the kitchen. Please carry on, I shall still be able to hear you. Continue to tell me ofyour sofa, and do feel free in the meantime to sit on mine. Has it beenstuck there for long?"

"Oh, only about three weeks," said Richard, sitting down. "Icould just saw it up and throw it away, but I can't believe that thereisn't a logical answer. And it also made me think — it would be reallyuseful to know before you buy a piece of furniture whether it'sactually going to fit up the stairs or around the corner. So I'vemodelled the problem in three dimensions on my computer — and so farit just says no way."

"It says what?" called Reg, over the noise of filling the kettle.

"That it can't be done. I told it to compute the moves necessaryto get the sofa out, and it said there aren't any. I said "What?" andit said there aren't any. I then asked it, and this is the reallymysterious thing, to compute the moves necessary to get the sofa intoits present position in the first place, and it said that it couldn'thave got there. Not without fundamental restructuring of the walls. So,either there's something wrong with the fundamental structure of thematter in my walls or," he added with a sigh, "there's something wrongwith the program. Which would you guess?"

"And are you married?" called Reg.

"What? Oh, I see what you mean. A sofa stuck on the stairs for amonth. Well, no, not married as such, but yes, there is a specific girlthat I'm not married to."

"What's she like? What does she do?"

"She's a professional cellist. I have to admit that the sofa hasbeen a bit of a talking point. In fact she's moved back to her own flatuntil I get it sorted out. She, well…"

He was suddenly sad, and he stood up and wandered around the roomin a desultory sort of way and ended up in front of the dying fire. Hegave it a bit of a poke and threw on a couple of extra logs to try andward off the chill of the room.

"She's Gordon's sister, in fact," he added at last. "But they arevery different. I'm not sure she really approves of computers

verymuch. And she doesn't much like his attitude to money. I don't think I entirely blame her, actually, and she doesn't know the half of it."

"Which is the half she doesn't know?"

Richard sighed.

"Well," he said, "it's to do with the project which first madethe software incarnation of the company profitable. It was calledReason, and in its own way it was sensational."

"What was it?"

"Well, it was a kind of back-to-front program. It's funny howmany of the best ideas are just an old idea back-to-front. You seethere have already been several programs written that help you toarrive at decisions by properly ordering and analysing all the relevantfacts so that they then point naturally towards the right decision. Thedrawback with these is that the decision which all the properly orderedand analysed facts point to is not necessarily the one you want."

"Yeeeess…" said Reg's voice from the kitchen.

"Well, Gordon's great insight was to design a program whichallowed you to specify in advance what decision you wished it to reach,and only then to give it all the facts. The program's task, which itwas able to accomplish with consummate ease, was simply to construct aplausible series of logical-sounding steps to connect the premises withthe conclusion.

"And I have to say that it worked brilliantly. Gordon was able tobuy himself a Porsche almost immediately despite being completely brokeand a hopeless driver. Even his bank manager was unable to find faultwith his reasoning. Even when Gordon wrote it off three weeks later."

"Heavens. And did the program sell very well?"

"No. We never sold a single copy."

"You astonish me. It sounds like a real winner to me."

"It was," said Richard hesitantly. "The entire project was boughtup, lock, stock and barrel, by the Pentagon. The deal put WayForward ona very sound financial foundation. Its moral foundation, on the otherhand, is not something I would want to trust my weight to. I'verecently been analysing a lot of the arguments put forward in favour ofthe Star Wars project, and if you know what you're looking for, thepattern of the algorithms is very clear.

"So much so, in fact, that looking at Pentagon policies over thelast couple of years I think I can be fairly sure that the US Navy isusing version 2.00 of the program, while the Air Force for some reasononly has the beta-test version of 1.5. Odd, that."

“Do you have a copy?”

“Certainly not,” said Richard, “I wouldn’t have anything to dowith it. Anyway, when the Pentagon bought everything, they boughteverything. Every scrap of code, every disk, every notebook. I was gladto see the back of it. If indeed we have. I just busy myself with myown projects.”

He poked at the fire again and wondered what he was doing herewhen he had so much work on. Gordon was on at him continually aboutgetting the new, super version of Anthem ready for taking advantage ofthe Macintosh II, and he was well behind with it. And as for theproposed module for converting incoming Dow Jones stock-marketinformation into MIDI data in real time, he’d only meant that as ajoke, but Gordon, of course, had flipped over the idea and insisted onits being implemented. That too was meant to be ready but wasn’t. Hesuddenly knew exactly why it was he was here.

Well, it had been a pleasant evening, even if he couldn’t see whyReg had been quite so keen to see him. He picked up a couple of booksfrom the table. The table obviously doubled as a dining table, because although the piles looked as if they had been there for weeks, theabsence of dust immediately around them showed that they had been movedrecently.

Maybe, he thought, the need for amiable chit-chat with someonedifferent can become as urgent as any other need when you live in acommunity as enclosed as a Cambridge college was, even nowadays. He wasa likeable old fellow, but it was clear from dinner that many of hiscolleagues found his eccentricities formed rather a rich sustained diet– particularly when they had so many of their own to contend with. Athought about Susan nagged him, but he was used to that. He flippedthrough the two books he’d picked up.

One of them, an elderly one, was an account of the hauntings ofBorley Rectory, the most haunted house in England. Its spine wasgetting raggedy, and the photographic plates were so grey and blurry asto be virtually indistinguishable. A picture he thought must be a verylucky (or faked) shot of a ghostly apparition turned out, when heexamined the caption, to be a portrait of the author.

The other book was more recent, and by an odd coincidence was aguide to the Greek islands. He thumbed through it idly and a piece ofpaper fell out.

“Earl Grey or Lapsang Souchong?” called out Reg. “Or Darjeeling?Or PG Tips? It’s all tea bags anyway, I’m afraid. And none of them veryfresh.”

“Darjeeling will do fine,” replied Richard, stooping to pick

upthe piece of paper.

"Milk?" called Reg.

"Er, please."

"One lump or two?"

"One, please."

Richard slipped the paper back into the book, noticing as he didso that it had a hurriedly scribbled note on it. The note said, oddlyenough, "Regard this simple silver salt cellar. Regard this simplehat."

"Sugar?"

"Er, what?" said Richard, startled. He put the book hurriedlyback on the pile.

"Just a tiny joke of mine," said Reg cheerily, "to see if peopleare listening." He emerged beaming from the kitchen carrying a smalltray with two cups on it, which he hurled suddenly to the floor. Thetea splashed over the carpet. One of the cups shattered and the otherbounced under the table. Reg leaned against the door frame, white-facedand staring.

A frozen instant of time slid silently by while Richard was toostartled to react, then he leaped awkwardly forward to help. But theold man was already apologising and offering to make him another cup.Richard helped him to the sofa.

"Are you all right?" asked Richard helplessly. "Shall I get adoctor?"

Reg waved him down. "It's all right," he insisted, "I'm perfectlywell. Thought I heard, well, a noise that startled me. But it wasnothing. Just overcome with the tea fumes, I expect. Let me just catchmy breath. I think a little, er, port will revive me excellently. Sosorry, I didn't mean to startle you." He waved in the general directionof the port decanter. Richard hurriedly poured a small glass and gaveit to him.

"What kind of noise?" he asked, wondering what on earth couldshock him so much.

At that moment came the sound of movement upstairs and anextraordinary kind of heavy breathing noise.

"That…" whispered Reg. The glass of port lay shattered at hisfeet. Upstairs someone seemed to be stamping. "Did you hear it?"

"Well, yes."

This seemed to relieve the old man.

Richard looked nervously up at the ceiling. "Is there someone upthere?" he asked, feeling this was a lame question, but one that had tobe asked.

"No," said Reg in a low voice that shocked Richard with the

fearit carried, “no one. Nobody that should be there.”

“Then…”

Reg was struggling shakily to his feet, but there was suddenly afierce determination about him.

“I must go up there,” he said quietly. “I must. Please wait forme here.”

“Look, what is this?” demanded Richard, standing between Reg andthe doorway. “What is it, a burglar? Look, I’ll go. I’m sure it’snothing, it’s just the wind or something.” Richard didn’t know why hewas saying this. It clearly wasn’t the wind, or even anything like thewind, because though the wind might conceivably make heavy breathingnoises, it rarely stamped its feet in that way.

“No,” the old man said, politely but firmly moving him aside, “itis for me to do.”

Richard followed him helplessly through the door into the smallhallway, beyond which lay the tiny kitchen. A dark wooden staircase ledup from here; the steps seemed damaged and scuffed.

Reg turned on a light. It was a dim one that hung naked at thetop of the stairwell, and he looked up it with grim apprehension.

“Wait here,” he said, and walked up two steps. He then turned andfaced Richard with a look of the most profound seriousness on his face.

“I am sorry,” he said, “that you have become involved in whatis…the more difficult side of my life. But you are involved now,regrettable though that may be, and there is something I must ask you.I do not know what awaits me up there, do not know exactly. I do notknow if it is something which I have foolishly brought upon myself withmy…my hobbies, or if it is something to which I have fallen aninnocent victim. If it is the former, then I have only myself to blame,for I am like a doctor who cannot give up smoking, or perhaps worsestill, like an ecologist who cannot give up his car — if the latter,then I hope it may not happen to you.

“What I must ask you is this. When I come back down these stairs,always supposing of course that I do, then if my behaviour strikes youas being in any way odd, if I appear not to be myself, then you mustleap on me and wrestle me to the ground. Do you understand? You mustprevent me from doing anything I may try to do.”

“But how will I know?” asked an incredulous Richard. “Sorry Idon’t mean it to sound like that, but I don’t know what…?”

“You will know,” said Reg. “Now please wait for me in the

mainroom. And close the door."

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Richard stepped back and did ashe was asked. From inside the large untidy room he listened to thesound of the Professor's tread mounting the stairs one at a time.

He mounted them with a heavy deliberation, like the ticking of agreat, slow clock.

Richard heard him reach the top landing. There he paused insilence. Seconds went by, five, maybe ten, maybe twenty. Then came again the heavy movement and breath that had first so harrowed theProfessor.

Richard moved quickly to the door but did not open it. The chillof the room oppressed and disturbed him. He shook his head to try andshake off the feeling, and then held his breath as the footstepsstarted once again slowly to traverse the two yards of the landing andto pause there again.

After only a few seconds, this time Richard heard the long slowsqueak of a door being opened inch by inch, inch by cautious inch,until it must surely now at last be standing wide agape.

Nothing further seemed to happen for a long, long time.

Then at last the door closed once again, slowly.

The footsteps crossed the landing and paused again. Richardbacked a few slight paces from the door, staring fixedly at it. Oncemore the footsteps started to descend the stairs, slowly, deliberatelyand quietly, until at last they reached the bottom. Then after a fewseconds more the door handle began to rotate. The door opened and Regwalked calmly in.

"It's all right, it's just a horse in the bathroom," he saidquietly.

Richard leaped on him and wrestled him to the ground.

"No," gasped Reg, "no, get off me, let me go, I'm perfectly allright, damn it. It's just a horse, a perfectly ordinary horse." Heshook Richard off with no great difficulty and sat up, puffing andblowing and pushing his hands through his limited hair. Richard stoodover him warily, but with great and mounting embarrassment. He edgedback, and let Reg stand up and sit on a chair.

"Just a horse," said Reg, "but, er, thank you for taking me at myword." He brushed himself down.

"A horse," repeated Richard.

"Yes," said Reg.

Richard went out and looked up the stairs and then came back in.

"A horse?" he said again.

"Yes, it is," said the Professor. "Wait — " he motioned

toRichard, who was about to go out again and investigate — “let it be.It won’t be long.”

Richard stared in disbelief. “You say there’s a horse in yourbathroom, and all you can do is stand there naming Beatles songs?”

The Professor looked blankly at him.

“Listen,” he said, “I’m sorry if I…alarmed you earlier, it wasjust a slight turn. These things happen, my dear fellow, don’t upsetyourself about it. Dear me, I’ve known odder things in my time. Many ofthem. Far odder. She’s only a horse, for heaven’s sake. I’ll go and lether out later. Please don’t concern yourself. Let us revive our spiritswith some port.”

“But…how did it get in there?”

“Well, the bathroom window’s open. I expect she came in throughthat.”

Richard looked at him, not for the first and certainly not forthe last time, through eyes that were narrowed with suspicion.

“You’re doing it deliberately, aren’t you?” he said.

“Doing what, my dear fellow?”

“I don’t believe there’s a horse in your bathroom,” said Richardsuddenly. “I don’t know what is there, I don’t know what you’re doing,I don’t know what any of this evening means, but I don’t believethere’s a horse in your bathroom.” And brushing aside Reg’s furtherprotestations he went up to look.

The bathroom was not large.

The walls were panelled in old oak linenfold which, given the ageand nature of the building, was quite probably priceless, but otherwisethe fittings were stark and institutional.

There was old, scuffed, black-and-white checked linoleum on thefloor, a small basic bath, well cleaned but with very elderly stainsand chips in the enamel, and also a small basic basin with a toothbrushand toothpaste in a Duralex beaker standing next to the taps. Screwedinto the probably priceless panelling above the basin was a tin mirror– fronted bathroom cabinet. It looked as if it had been repainted manytimes, and the mirror was stained round the edges with condensation.The lavatory had an old-fashioned cast-iron chain-pull cistern. Therewas an old cream-painted wooden cupboard standing in the corner, withan old brown bentwood chair next to it, on which lay some neatly foldedbut threadbare small towels. There was also a large horse in the room,taking up most of it.

Richard stared at it, and it stared at Richard in an appraisingkind of way. Richard swayed slightly. The horse stood quite still.After a while it looked at the cupboard instead. It

seemed, if notcontent, then at least perfectly resigned to being where it was untilit was put somewhere else. It also seemed… what was it?

It was bathed in the glow of the moonlight that streamed inthrough the window. The window was open but small and was, besides, onthe second floor, so the notion that the horse had entered by thatroute was entirely fanciful.

There was something odd about the horse, but he couldn't saywhat. Well, there was one thing that was clearly very odd about itindeed, which was that it was standing in a college bathroom. Maybethat was all.

He reached out, rather tentatively, to pat the creature on itsneck. It felt normal — firm, glossy, it was in good condition. Theeffect of the moonlight on its coat was a little mazy, but everythinglooks a little odd by moonlight. The horse shook its mane a little whenhe touched it, but didn't seem to mind too much.

After the success of patting it, Richard stroked it a few timesand scratched it gently under the jaw. Then he noticed that there wasanother door into the bathroom, in the far corner. He moved cautiouslyaround the horse and approached the other door. He backed up against itand pushed it open tentatively.

It just opened into the Professor's bedroom, a small roomcluttered with books and shoes and a small single bed. This room, too,had another door, which opened out on to the landing again.

Richard noticed that the floor of the landing was newly scuffedand scratched as the stairs had been, and these marks were consistentwith the idea that the horse had somehow been pushed up the stairs. Hewouldn't have liked to have had to do it himself, and he would haveliked to have been the horse having it done to him even less, but itwas just about possible.

But why? He had one last look at the horse, which had one lastlook back at him, and then he returned downstairs.

"I agree," he said. "You have a horse in your bathroom and Iwill, after all, have a little port."

He poured some for himself, and then some for Reg, who wasquietly contemplating the fire and was in need of a refill.

"Just as well I did put out three glasses after all," said Regchattily. "I wondered why earlier, and now I remember.

"You asked if you could bring a friend, but appear not to havedone so. On account of the sofa no doubt. Never mind, these thingshappen. Whoa, not too much, you'll spill it."

All horse-related questions left Richard's mind abruptly.

“I did?” he said.

“Oh yes. I remember now. You rang me back to ask me if it wouldbe all right, as I recall. I said I would be charmed, and fullyintended to be. I’d saw the thing up if I were you. Don’t want tosacrifice your happiness to a sofa. Or maybe she decided that anevening with your old tutor would be blisteringly dull and opted forthe more exhilarating course of washing her hair instead. Dear me, Iknow what I would have done. It’s only lack of hair that forces me topursue such a hectic social round these days.”

It was Richard’s turn to be white-faced and staring.

Yes, he had assumed that Susan would not want to come.

Yes, he had said to her it would be terribly dull. But she hadinsisted that she wanted to come because it would be the only way she’dget to see his face for a few minutes not bathed in the light of acomputer screen, so he had agreed and arranged that he would bring herafter all.

Only he had completely forgotten this. He had not picked her up.

He said, “Can I use your phone, please?”

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CHAPTER 9

Gordon Way lay on the ground, unclear about what to do.

He was dead. There seemed little doubt about that. There was a horrific hole in his chest, but the blood that was gobbing out of ithad slowed to a trickle. Otherwise there was no movement from his chest at all, or, indeed, from any other part of him.

He looked up, and from side to side, and it became clear to himthat whatever part of him it was that was moving, it wasn't any part ofhis body.

The mist rolled slowly over him, and explained nothing. At a fewfeet distant from him his shotgun lay smoking quietly in the grass.

He continued to lie there, like someone lying awake at fouro'clock in the morning, unable to put their mind to rest, but unable tofind anything to do with it. He realised that he had just had somethingof a shock, which might account for his inability to think clearly, butdidn't account for his ability actually to think at all.

In the great debate that has raged for centuries about what, ifanything, happens to you after death, be it heaven, hell, purgatory orextinction, one thing has never been in doubt — that you would atleast know the answer when you were dead.

Gordon Way was dead, but he simply hadn't the slightest idea whathe was meant to do about it. It wasn't a situation he had encountered before.

He sat up. The body that sat up seemed as real to him as the bodythat still lay slowly cooling on the ground, giving up its blood heatin wraiths of steam that mingled with the mist of the chill night air.

Experimenting a bit further, he tried standing up, slowly,wonderingly and wobblingly. The ground seemed to give him support, ittook his weight. But then of course he appeared to have no weight thatneeded to be taken. When he bent to touch the ground he could feelnothing save a kind of distant rubbery resistance like the sensationyou get if you try and pick something up when your arm has gone dead.

His arm had gone dead. His legs too, and his other arm, and all his

torso and his head.

His body was dead. He could not say why his mind was not.

He stood in a kind of frozen, sleepless horror while the mistcurled slowly through him.

He looked back down at the him, the ghastly, astonished-lookinghim — thing lying still and mangled on the ground, and his fleshwanted to creep. Or rather, he wanted flesh that could creep. He wantedflesh. He wanted body. He had none.

A sudden cry of horror escaped from his mouth but was nothing andwent nowhere. He shook and felt nothing.

Music and a pool of light seeped from his car. He walked towardsit. He tried to walk sturdily, but it was a faint and feeble kind ofwalking, uncertain and, well, insubstantial. The ground felt frailbeneath his feet.

The door of the car was still open on the driver's side, as hehad left it when he had leaped out to deal with the boot lid, thinkinghe'd only be two seconds.

That was all of two minutes ago now, when he'd been alive. Whenhe'd been a person. When he'd thought he was going to be leapingstraight back in and driving off. Two minutes and a lifetime ago.

This was insane, wasn't it? he thought suddenly.

He walked around the door and bent down to peer into the externalrear-view mirror.

He looked exactly like himself, albeit like himself after he'dhad a terrible fright, which was to be expected, but that was him, thatwas normal. This must be something he was imagining, some horrible kindof waking dream. He had a sudden thought and tried breathing on therear — view mirror.

Nothing. Not a single droplet formed. That would satisfy adoctor, that's what they always did on television — if no mist formedon the mirror, there was no breath. Perhaps, he thought anxiously tohimself, perhaps it was something to do with having heated wingmirrors. Didn't this car have heated wing mirrors? Hadn't the salesmangone on and on about heated this, electric that, and servo-assisted theother? Maybe they were digital wing mirrors. That was it. Digital,heated, servo — assisted, computer-controlled, breath-resistant wingmirrors…

He was, he realised, thinking complete nonsense. He turned slowlyand gazed again in apprehension at the body lying on the ground behindhim with half its chest blown away. That would certainly satisfy adoctor. The sight would be appalling enough if it was somebody else'sbody, but his own…

He was dead. Dead…dead…He tried to make the word toll dramatically in his mind, but it wouldn't. He was not a film soundtrack, he was just dead.

Peering at his body in appalled fascination, he gradually becamedistressed by the expression of asinine stupidity on its

face.

It was perfectly understandable, of course. It was just such anexpression as somebody who is in the middle of being shot with his ownshotgun by somebody who had been hiding in the boot of his car might beexpected to wear, but he nevertheless disliked the idea that anyonemight find him looking like that.

He knelt down beside it in the hope of being able to rearrangehis features into some semblance of dignity, or at least basicintelligence.

It proved to be almost impossibly difficult. He tried to knead the skin, the sickeningly familiar skin, but somehow he couldn't seemto get a proper grip on it, or on anything. It was like trying to modelplasticine when your arm has gone to sleep, except that instead of hisgrip slipping off the model, it would slip through it. In this case,his hand slipped through his face.

Nauseated horror and rage swept through him at his sheer bloodyblasted impotence, and he was suddenly startled to find himselfthrottling and shaking his own dead body with a firm and furious grip.He staggered back in amazed shock. All he had managed to do was to addto the inanely stupefied look of the corpse a twisted-up mouth and asquint. And bruises flowering on its neck.

He started to sob, and this time sound seemed to come, a strangehowling from deep within whatever this thing he had become was.Clutching his hands to his face, he staggered backwards, retreated tohis car and flung himself into the seat. The seat received him in aloose and distant kind of way, like an aunt who disapproves of the lastfifteen years of your life and will therefore furnish you with a basicsherry, but refuses to catch your eye.

Could he get himself to a doctor?

To avoid facing the absurdity of the idea he grappled violentlywith the steering wheel, but his hands slipped through it. He tried towrestle with the automatic transmission shift and ended up thumping itin rage, but not being able properly to grasp or push it.

The stereo was still playing light orchestral music into thetelephone, which had been lying on the passenger seat listeningpatiently all this time. He stared at it and realised with a growingfever of excitement that he was still connected to Susan's telephone -?answering machine. It was the type that would simply run and run untilhe hung up. He was still in contact with the world.

He tried desperately to pick up the receiver, fumbled, let

itslip, and was in the end reduced to bending himself down over itsmouthpiece. “Susan!” he cried into it, his voice a hoarse and distantwail on the wind. “Susan, help me! Help me for God’s sake. Susan, I’mdead…I’m dead…I’m dead and…I don’t know what to do…” He broke down again, sobbing in desperation, and tried to cling to the phonelike a baby clinging to its blanket for comfort.

“Help me, Susan…” he cried again.

“Beep,” said the phone.

He looked down at it again where he was cuddling it. He hadmanaged to push something after all. He had managed to push the buttonwhich disconnected the call. Feverishly he attempted to grapple thething again, but it constantly slipped through his fingers andeventually lay immobile on the seat. He could not touch it. He couldnot push the buttons. In rage he flung it at the windscreen. Itresponded to that, all right. It hit the windscreen, careered straightback though him, bounced off the seat and then lay still on thetransmission tunnel, impervious to all his further attempts to touchit.

For several minutes still he sat there, his head nodding slowlyas terror began to recede into blank desolation.

A couple of cars passed by, but would have noticed nothing odd -?a car stopped by the wayside. Passing swiftly in the night theirheadlights would probably not have picked out the body lying in thegrass behind the car. They certainly would not have noticed a ghostsitting inside it crying to himself.

He didn’t know how long he sat there. He was hardly aware of timepassing, only that it didn’t seem to pass quickly. There was little external stimulus to mark its passage. He didn’t feel cold. In fact hecould almost not remember what cold meant or felt like, he just knewthat it was something he would have expected to feel at this moment.

Eventually he stirred from his pathetic huddle. He would have todo something, though he didn’t know what. Perhaps he should try andreach his cottage, though he didn’t know what he would do when he gotthere. He just needed something to try for. He needed to make itthrough the night.

Pulling himself together he slipped out of the car, his foot andknee grazing easily through part of the door frame. He went to lookagain at his body, but it wasn’t there.

As if the night hadn’t produced enough shocks already. Hestarted, and stared at the damp depression in the grass.

His body was not there.

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CHAPTER 10

Richard made the hastiest departure that politeness would allow.

He said thank you very much and what a splendid evening it hadbeen and that any time Reg was coming up to London he must let him,Richard, know and was there anything he could do to help about thehorse. No? Well, all right then, if you're sure, and thank you again,so much.

He stood there for a moment or two after the door finally closed,pondering things.

He had noticed during the short time that the light from Reg'sroom flooded out on to the landing of the main staircase, that therewere no marks on the floorboards there at all. It seemed odd that the horse should only have scuffed the floorboards inside Reg's room.

Well, it all seemed very odd, full stop, but here was yet anothercurious fact to add to the growing pile. This was supposed to have beena relaxing evening away from work.

On an impulse he knocked on the door opposite to Reg's. It tooksuch a long time to be answered that Richard had given up and wasturning to go when at last he heard the door creak open.

He had a slight shock when he saw that staring sharply up at himlike a small and suspicious bird was the don with the racing-yacht keelfor a nose.

"Er, sorry," said Richard, abruptly, "but, er, have you seen orheard a horse coming up this staircase tonight?"

The man stopped his obsessive twitching of his fingers. He cockedhis head slightly on one side and then seemed to need to go on a longjourney inside himself to find a voice, which when found turned out tobe a thin and soft little one.

He said, "That is the first thing anybody has said to me forseventeen years, three months and two days, five hours, nineteenminutes and twenty seconds. I've been counting."

He closed the door softly again.

Richard virtually ran through Second Court.

When he reached First Court he steadied himself and slowed down to a walking pace.

The chill night air was rasping in his lungs and there was nopoint in running. He hadn't managed to talk to Susan because Reg'sphone wasn't working, and this was another thing that he had beenmysteriously coy about. That at least was susceptible of a rationalexplanation. He probably hadn't paid his phone bill.

Richard was about to emerge out on to the street when instead hedecided to pay a quick visit to the porter's lodge, which was tuckedaway inside the great archway entrance into the college. It was a smallhutchlike place filled with keys, messages and a single electric barheater. A radio nattered to itself in the background.

"Excuse me," he said to the large black-suited man standingbehind the counter with his arms folded. "I…"

"Yes, Mr MacDuff, what can I do for you?"

In his present state of mind Richard would have been hard-pressedhimself to remember his own name and was startled for a moment. However, college porters are legendary for their ability to performsuch feats of memory, and for their tendency to show them off at theslightest provocation.

"Is there," said Richard, "a horse anywhere in the college -? that you know of? I mean, you would know if there was a horse in thecollege, wouldn't you?"

The porter didn't blink.

"No, sir, and yes, sir. Anything else I can help you with, MrMacDuff, sir?"

"Er, no," said Richard and tapped his fingers a couple of timeson the counter. "No. Thank you. Thank you very much for your help. Niceto see you again, er…Bob," he hazarded. "Good-night, then."

He left.

The porter remained perfectly still with his arms folded, butshaking his head a very, very little bit.

"Here's some coffee for you, Bill," said another porter, a shortwiry one, emerging from an inner sanctum with a steaming cup. "Gettinga bit colder tonight?"

"I think it is, Fred, thanks," said Bill, taking the cup.

He took a sip. "You can say what you like about people, theydon't get any less peculiar. Fellow in here just now asking if therewas a horse in the college."

"Oh yes?" Fred sipped at his own coffee, and let the steam smarthis eyes. "I had a chap in here earlier. Sort of strange foreignpriest. Couldn't understand a word he said at first. But he seemedhappy just to stand by the fire and listen to the news on the radio."

"Foreigners, eh."

"In the end I told him to shoot off. Standing in front of my firelike that. Suddenly he says is that really what he must do? Shoot off?I said, in my best Bogart voice, "You better believe it, buddy.""

"Really? Sounded more like Jimmy Cagney to me."

“No, that’s my Bogart voice. This is my Jimmy Cagney voice -?”You better believe it, buddy.”"

Bill frowned at him. “Is that your Jimmy Cagney voice? I alwaysthought that was your Kenneth McKellar voice.”

“You don’t listen properly, Bill, you haven’t got the ear. Thisis Kenneth McKellar. “Oh, you take the high road and I’ll take the lowroad…”"

“Oh, I see. I was thinking of the Scottish Kenneth McKellar. Sowhat did this priest fellow say then, Fred?”

“Oh, he just looked me straight in the eyes, Bill, and said inthis strange sort of…”

“Skip the accent, Fred, just tell me what he said, if it’s worthhearing.”

“He just said he did believe me.”

“So. Not a very interesting story then, Fred.”

“Well, maybe not. I only mention it because he also said that he’d left his horse in a washroom and would I see that it was all right.”

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CHAPTER 11

Gordon Way drifted miserably along the dark road, or rather,tried to drift.

He felt that as a ghost — which is what he had to admit tohimself he had become — he should be able to drift. He knew little enough about ghosts, but he felt that if you were going to be one thenthere ought to be certain compensations for not having a physical bodyto lug around, and that among them ought to be the ability simply todrift. But no, it seemed he was going to have to walk every step of theway.

His aim was to try and make it to his house. He didn't know whathe would do when he got there, but even ghosts have to spend the nightsomewhere, and he felt that being in familiar surroundings might help.Help what, he didn't know. At least the journey gave him an objective,and he would just have to think of another one when he arrived.

He trudged despondently from lamppost to lamppost, stopping ateach one to look at bits of himself.

He was definitely getting a bit wraithlike.

At times he would fade almost to nothing, and would seem to belittle more than a shadow playing in the mist, a dream of himself thatcould just evaporate and be gone. At other times he seemed to be almostsolid and real again. Once or twice he would try leaning against alamppost, and would fall straight through it if he wasn't careful.

At last, and with great reluctance, he actually began to turn hismind to what it was that had happened. Odd, that reluctance. He reallydidn't want to think about it. Psychologists say that the mind willoften try to suppress the memory of traumatic events, and this, hethought, was probably the answer. After all, if having a strange figurejump out of the boot of your own car and shoot you dead didn't count asa traumatic experience, he'd like to know what did.

He trudged on wearily.

He tried to recall the figure to his mind's eye, but it was likeprobing a hurting tooth, and he thought of other things.

Like, was his will up-to-date? He couldn't remember, and made amental note to call his lawyer tomorrow, and then made another mentalnote that he would have to stop making mental notes like that.

How would his company survive without him? He didn't like eitherof the possible answers to that very much.

What about his obituary? There was a thought that chilled him tohis bones, wherever they'd got to. Would he be able to get hold of acopy? What would it say? They'd better give him a good write-up, thebastards. Look at what he'd done. Single-handedly saved the Britishsoftware industry: huge exports, charitable contributions, researchscholarships, crossing the Atlantic in a solar-powered submarine(failed, but a good try) — all sorts of things. They'd better not godigging up that Pentagon stuff again or he'd get his lawyer on to them.He made a mental note to call him in the mor…

No.

Anyway, can a dead person sue for libel? Only his lawyer wouldknow, and he was not going to be able to call him in the morning. Heknew with a sense of creeping dread that of all the things he had leftbehind in the land of the living it was the telephone that he was going to miss the most, and then he turned his mind determinedly back to

where it didn't want to go.

The figure.

It seemed to him that the figure had been almost like a figure ofDeath itself; or was that his imagination playing tricks with him? Washe dreaming that it was a cowled figure? What would any figure, whethercowled or just casually dressed, be doing in the boot of his car?

At that moment a car zipped past him on the road and disappearedoff into the night, taking its oasis of light with it. He thought withlonging of the warm, leather-upholstered, climate-controlled comfort ofhis own car abandoned on the road behind him, and then a suddenextraordinary thought struck him.

Was there any way he could hitch a lift? Could anyone actuallysee him? How would anyone react if they could? Well, there was only oneway to find out.

He heard another car coming up in the distance behind him andturned to face it. The twin pools of hazy lights approached through themist and Gordon gritted his phantom teeth and stuck his thumb out atthem.

The car swept by regardless.

Nothing.

Angrily he made an indistinct V sign at the receding red rearlights, and realised, looking straight through his own upraised arm,that he wasn't at his most visible at the moment. Was there perhapssome effort of will he could make to render himself more visible when he wanted to? He screwed up his eyes in concentration, then realisedthat he would need to have his eyes

open in order to judge the results.He tried again, forcing his mind as hard as he could, but the resultswere unsatisfactory.

Though it did seem to make some kind of rudimentary, glowingdifference, he couldn't sustain it, and it faded almost immediately,however much he piled on the mental pressure. He would have to judgethe timing very carefully if he was going to make his presence felt, orat least seen.

Another car approached from behind, travelling fast. He turnedagain, stuck his thumb out, waited till the moment was right and willedhimself visible.

The car swerved slightly, and then carried on its way, only alittle more slowly. Well, that was something. What else could he do? Hewould go and stand under a lamppost for a start, and he would practise.The next car he would get for sure.

Dirk Gently 1 - Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency

CHAPTER 12

"…so if you'd like to leave a message, I'll get back to you assoon as possible. Maybe."

Beep.

"Shit. Damn. Hold on a minute. Blast. Look…er…"

Click.

Richard pushed the phone back into its cradle and slammed his carinto reverse for twenty yards to have another look at the sign-post bythe road junction he'd just sped past in the mist. He had extractedhimself from the Cambridge one-way system by the usual method, whichinvolved going round and round it faster and faster until he achieved asort of escape velocity and flew off at a tangent in a randomdirection, which he was now trying to identify and correct for.

Arriving back at the junction he tried to correlate theinformation on the signpost with the information on the map. But itcouldn't be done. The road junction was quite deliberately sitting on apage divide on the map, and the signpost was revolving maliciously inthe wind. Instinct told him that he was heading in the wrong direction,but he didn't want to go back the way he'd come for fear of gettingsucked back into the gravitational whirlpool of Cambridge's trafficsystem.

He turned left, therefore, in the hope of finding better fortunein that direction, but after a while lost his nerve and turned aspeculative right, and then chanced another exploratory left and aftera few more such manoeuvres was thoroughly lost.

He swore to himself and turned up the heating in the car. If hehad been concentrating on where he was going rather than trying tonavigate and telephone at the same time, he told himself, he would atleast know where he was now. He didn't actually like having a telephonein his car, he found it a bother and an intrusion. But Gordon hadinsisted and indeed had paid for it.

He sighed in exasperation, backed up the black Saab and turnedaround again. As he did so he nearly ran into someone lugging a bodyinto a field. At least that was what it looked like for a second to his overwrought brain, but in fact it was probably a local farmer with asackful of something nutritious, though what he was doing with it on anight like this was anyone's guess. As his headlights swung aroundagain, they caught for a moment a silhouette of the figure trudging offacross the field with the sack on his back.

"Rather him than me," thought Richard grimly, and drove

offagain.

After a few minutes he reached a junction with what looked alittle more like a main road, nearly turned right down it, but thenturned left instead. There was no signpost.

He poked at the buttons on his phone again.

"…get back to you as soon as possible. Maybe."

Beep.

"Susan, it's Richard. Where do I start? What a mess. Look I'msorry, sorry, sorry. I screwed up very badly, and it's all my fault.And look, whatever it takes to make up for it, I'll do it, solemnpromise…"

He had a slight feeling that this wasn't the right tone to adoptwith an answering machine, but he carried straight on.

"Honestly, we can go away, take a holiday for a week, or evenjust this weekend if you like. Really, this weekend. We'll go somewheresunny. Doesn't matter how much pressure Gordon tries to put on me, andyou know the sort of pressure he can muster, he is your brother, afterall. I'll just…er, actually, it might have to be next weekend. Damn,damn, damn. It's just that I really have promised to get, no, look, itdoesn't matter. We'll just do it. I don't care about getting Anthemfinished for Comdex. It's not the end of the world. We'll just go.Gordon will just have to take a running jump — Gaaarghhhh!"

Richard swerved wildly to avoid the spectre of Gordon Way whichsuddenly loomed in his headlights and took a running jump at him.

He slammed on the brakes, started to skid, tried to remember whatit was you were supposed to do when you found yourself skidding, heknew he'd seen it on some television programme about driving he'd seenages ago, what was the programme? God, he couldn't even remember thetitle of the programme, let alone — oh yes, they'd said you mustn'tslam on the brakes. That was it. The world swung sickeningly around him with slow and appalling force as the car slewed across the road, spun,thudded against the grass verge, then slithered and rocked itself to ahalt, facing the wrong way. He collapsed, panting, against the steeringwheel.

He picked up the phone from where he'd dropped it.

"Susan," he gasped, "I'll get back to you," and hung up.

He raised his eyes.

Standing full in the glare of his headlights was the spectralfigure of Gordon Way staring straight in through the windscreen withghastly horror in its eyes, slowly raising its hand and pointing athim.

He wasn't sure how long he just sat there. The apparition

hadmelted from view in a few seconds, but Richard simply sat, shaking,probably for not more than a minute, until a sudden squeal of brakesand glare of lights roused him.

He shook his head. He was, he realised, stopped in the roadfacing the wrong way. The car that had just screeched to an abrupt haltalmost bumper to bumper with him was a police car. He took two or threedeep breaths and then, stiff and trembling, he climbed out and stood upto face the officer who was walking slowly towards him, silhouetted inthe police car's headlights.

The officer looked him up and down.

"Er, I'm sorry, officer," said Richard, with as much calmness ashe could wrench into his voice. "I, er, skidded. The roads are slipperyand I, er…skidded. I spun round. As you see, I, I'm facing the wrongway." He gestured at his car to indicate the way it was facing.

"Like to tell me why it was you skidded then, exactly, sir?" Thepolice officer was looking him straight in the eye while pulling out anotebook.

"Well, as I said," explained Richard, "the roads are slipperybecause of the mist, and, well, to be perfectly honest," he suddenlyfound himself saying, in spite of all his attempts to stop himself, "Iwas just driving along and I suddenly imagined that I saw my employerthrowing himself in front of my car."

The officer gazed at him levelly.

"Guilt complex, officer," added Richard with a twitch of a smile,"you know how it is. I was contemplating taking the weekend off."

The police officer seemed to hesitate, balanced on a knife edgebetween sympathy and suspicion. His eyes narrowed a little but didn'twaver.

"Been drinking, sir?"

"Yes," said Richard, with a quick sigh, "but very little. Twoglasses of wine max. Er…and a small glass of port. Absolute max. Itwas really just a lapse of concentration. I'm fine now."

"Name?"

Richard gave him his name and address. The policeman wrote it alldown carefully and neatly in his book, then peered at the carregistration number and wrote that down too.

"And who is your employer then, sir?"

"His name is Way. Gordon Way."

"Oh," said the policeman raising his eyebrows, "the computergentleman."

"Er, yes, that's right. I design software for the company.WayForward Technologies II."

“We’ve got one of your computers down the station,” said thepoliceman. “Buggered if I can get it to work.”

“Oh,” said Richard wearily, “which model do you have?”

“I think it’s called a Quark II.”

“Oh, well that’s simple,” said Richard with relief. “It doesn’twork. Never has done. The thing is a heap of shit.”

“Funny thing, sir, that’s what I’ve always said,” said thepoliceman. “Some of the other lads don’t agree.”

“Well, you’re absolutely right, officer. The thing is hopeless.It’s the major reason the original company went bust. I suggest you useit as a big paperweight.”

“Well, I wouldn’t like to do that, sir,” the policeman persisted.”The door would keep blowing open.”

“What do you mean, officer?” asked Richard.

“I use it to keep the door closed, sir. Nasty draughts down ourstation this time of year. In the summer, of course, we beat suspectsround the head with it.”

He flipped his book closed and prodded it into his pocket.

“My advice to you, sir, is to go nice and easy on the way back.Lock up the car and spend the weekend getting completely pissed. I findit’s the only way. Mind how you go now.”

He returned to his car, wound down the window, and watchedRichard manoeuvre his car around and drive off into the night beforeheading off himself.

Richard took a deep breath, drove calmly back to London, lethimself calmly into his flat, clambered calmly over the sofa, sat down,poured himself a stiff brandy and began seriously to shake.

There were three things he was shaking about.

There was the simple physical shock of his near-accident, whichis the sort of thing that always churns you up a lot more than youexpect. The body floods itself with adrenaline, which then hangs aroundyour system turning sour.

Then there was the cause of the skid — the extraordinaryapparition of Gordon throwing himself in front of his car at thatmoment. Boy oh boy. Richard took a mouthful of brandy and gargled withit. He put the glass down.

It was well known that Gordon was one of the world’s richest natural resources of guilt pressure, and that he could deliver a ton onyour doorstep fresh every morning, but Richard hadn’t realised he hadlet it get to him to such an unholy degree.

He took up his glass again, went upstairs and pushed open thedoor to his workroom, which involved shifting a stack of BYTE magazinesthat had toppled against it. He pushed them away with his foot andwalked to the end of the large room. A lot of glass at

this end let inviews over a large part of north London, from which the mist was nowclearing. St Paul's glowed in the dark distance and he stared at it fora moment or two but it didn't do anything special. After the events ofthe evening he found this came as a pleasant surprise.

At the other end of the room were a couple of long tablessmothered in, at the last count, six Macintosh computers. In the middlewas the Mac II on which a red wire-frame model of his sofa was lazilyrevolving within a blue wire-frame model of his narrow staircase,complete with banister rail, radiator and fuse-box details, and ofcourse the awkward turn halfway up.

The sofa would start out spinning in one direction, hit anobstruction, twist itself in another plane, hit another obstruction,revolve round a third axis until it was stopped again, then cyclethrough the moves again in a different order. You didn't have to watchthe sequence for very long before you saw it repeat itself.

The sofa was clearly stuck.

Three other Macs were connected up via long tangles of cable toan untidy agglomeration of synthesisers — an Emulator II + HD sampler,a rack of TX modules, a Prophet VS, a Roland JX 10, a Korg DW8000, anOctapad, a left-handed Synth-Axe MIDI guitar controller, and even anold drum machine stacked up and gathering dust in the corner — prettymuch the works. There was also a small and rarely used cassette taperecorder: all the music was stored in sequencer files on the computersrather than on tape.

He dumped himself into a seat in front of one of the Macs to seewhat, if anything, it was doing. It was displaying an "Untitled" Excelspreadsheet and he wondered why.

He saved it and looked to see if he'd left himself any notes andquickly discovered that the spreadsheet contained some of the data hehad previously downloaded after searching the World Reporter andKnowledge on-line databases for facts about swallows.

He now had figures which detailed their migratory habits, theirwing shapes, their aerodynamic profile and turbulence characteristics,and some sort of rudimentary figures concerning the patterns that aflock would adopt in flight, but as yet he had only the faintest ideaas to how he was going to synthesise them all together.

Because he was too tired to think particularly constructivelytonight he savagely selected and copied a whole swathe of figures fromthe spreadsheet at random, pasted them

into his own conversion program,which scaled and filtered and manipulated the figures according to hisown experimental algorithms, loaded the converted file into Performer,a powerful sequencer program, and played the result through random MIDIchannels to whichever synthesisers happened to be on at the moment.

The result was a short burst of the most hideous cacophony, andhe stopped it.

He ran the conversion program again, this time instructing it toforce-map the pitch values into G minor. This was a utility he wasdetermined in the end to get rid of because he regarded it as cheating.If there was any basis to his firmly held belief that the rhythms andharmonies of music which he found most satisfying could be found in, orat least derived from, the rhythms and harmonies of naturally occurringphenomena, then satisfying forms of modality and intonation shouldemerge naturally as well, rather than being forced.

For the moment, though, he forced it.

The result was a short burst of the most hideous cacophony in Gminor.

So much for random shortcuts.

The first task was a relatively simple one, which would be simplyto plot the waveform described by the tip of a swallow's wing as itflies, then synthesise that waveform. That way he would end up with asingle note, which would be a good start, and it shouldn't take morethan the weekend to do.

Except, of course, that he didn't have a weekend available to doit in because he had somehow to get Version 2 of Anthem out of the doorsometime during the course of the next year, or "month" as Gordoncalled it.

Which brought Richard inexorably to the third thing he wasshaking about.

There was absolutely no way that he could take the time off thisweekend or next to fulfil the promise he had made to Susan's telephone– answering machine. And that, if this evening's debacle had notalready done so, would surely spell the final end.

But that was it. The thing was done. There is nothing you can doabout a message on someone else's answering machine other than letevents take their course. It was done. It was irrevocable.

An odd thought suddenly struck him.

It took him by considerable surprise, but he couldn't really seewhat was wrong with it.

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CHAPTER 13

A pair of binoculars scanning the London night skyline, idly,curious, snooping. A little look here, a little look there, just seeingwhat's going on, anything interesting, anything useful.

The binoculars settle on the back of one particular house,attracted by a slight movement. One of those large late-Victorianvillas, probably flats now. Lots of black iron drainpipes. Green rubberdustbins. But dark. No, nothing.

The binoculars are just moving onwards when another slightmovement catches in the moonlight. The binoculars refocus veryslightly, trying to find a detail, a hard edge, a slight contrast inthe darkness. The mist has lifted now, and the darkness glistens. Theyrefocus a very, very little more.

There it is. Something, definitely. Only this time a littlehigher up, maybe a foot or so, maybe a yard. The binoculars settle andrelax — steady, trying for the edge, trying for the detail. There. Thebinoculars settle again — they have found their mark, straddledbetween a windowsill and a drainpipe.

It is a dark figure, splayed against the wall, looking down,looking for a new foothold, looking upwards, looking for a ledge. Thebinoculars peer intently.

The figure is that of a tall, thin man. His clothes are right forthe job, dark trousers, dark sweater, but his movements are awkward andangular. Nervous. Interesting. The binoculars wait and consider,consider and judge.

The man is clearly a rank amateur.

Look at his fumbling. Look at his ineptitude. His feet slip onthe drainpipe, his hands can't reach the ledge. He nearly falls. Hewaits to catch his breath. For a moment he starts to climb back down again, but seems to find that even tougher going.

He lunges again for the ledge and this time catches it. His footshoots out to steady himself and nearly misses the pipe. Could havebeen very nasty, very nasty indeed.

But now the way is easier and progress is better. He crosses toanother pipe, reaches a third-floor window ledge, flirts briefly withdeath as he crawls painfully on to it, and makes the cardinal error andlooks down. He sways briefly and sits back heavily. He shades his eyesand peers inside to check that the room is dark, and sets about gettingthe window open.

One of the things that distinguish the amateur from theprofessional is that this is the point when the amateur thinks it wouldhave been a good idea to bring along something to prise the

window openwith. Luckily for this amateur the householder is an amateur too, andthe sash window slides grudgingly up. The climber crawls, with somerelief, inside.

He should be locked up for his own protection, think thebinoculars. A hand starts to reach for the phone. At the window a facelooks back out and for a moment is caught in the moonlight, then it ducks back inside to carry on with its business.

The hand stays hovering over the phone for a moment or two, whilethe binoculars wait and consider, consider and judge. The hand reachesinstead for the A-Z street map of London.

There is a long studious pause, a little more intent binocularwork, and then the hand reaches for the phone again, lifts it anddials.

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CHAPTER 14

Susan's flat was small but spacious, which was a trick, reflectedRichard tensely as he turned on the light, that only women seemed ableto pull off.

It wasn't that observation which made him tense, of course -? he'd thought it before, many times. Every time he'd been in her flat,in fact. It always struck him, usually because he had just come fromhis own flat, which was four times the size and cramped. He'd just comefrom his own flat this time, only via a rather eccentric route, and itwas this that made his usual observation unusually tense.

Despite the chill of the night he was sweating.

He looked back out of the window, turned and tiptoed across theroom towards where the telephone and the answering machine stood ontheir own small table.

There was no point, he told himself, in tiptoeing. Susan wasn'tin. He would be extremely interested to know where she was, in fact -?just as she, he told himself, had probably been extremely interested inknowing where he had been at the beginning of the evening.

He realised he was still tiptoeing. He hit his leg to makehimself stop doing it, but carried on doing it none the less.

Climbing up the outside wall had been terrifying.

He wiped his forehead with the arm of his oldest and greasiestsweater. There had been a nasty moment when his life had flashed beforehis eyes but he had been too preoccupied with falling and had missedall the good bits. Most of the good bits had involved Susan, herealised. Susan or computers. Never Susan and computers — those hadlargely been the bad bits. Which was why he was here, he told himself.He seemed to need convincing, and told himself again.

He looked at his watch. Eleven forty-five.

It occurred to him he had better go and wash his wet and dirtyhands before he touched anything. It wasn't the police he was worriedabout, but Susan's terrifying cleaner. She would know.

He went into the bathroom, turned on the light switch, wiped it,and then stared at his own startled face in the bright neon-lit mirroras he ran the water over his hands. For a moment he thought of thedancing, warm candlelight of the Coleridge Dinner, and the images of itwelled up out of the dim and distant past of the earlier part of theevening. Life had seemed easy then, and

carefree. The wine, theconversation, simple conjuring tricks. He pictured the round pale faceof Sarah, pop-eyed with wonder. He washed his own face.

He thought:

"…Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!"

He brushed his own hair. He thought, too, of the pictures hanginghigh in the darkness above their heads. He cleaned his teeth. The low buzz of the neon light snapped him back to the present and he suddenlyremembered with appalled shock that he was here in his capacity asburglar.

Something made him look himself directly in the face in themirror, then he shook his head, trying to clear it.

When would Susan be back? That, of course, would depend on whatshe was doing. He quickly wiped his hands and made his way back to theanswering machine. He prodded at the buttons and his conscience proddedback at him. The tape wound back for what seemed to be an interminabletime, and he realised with a jolt that it was probably because Gordonhad been in full flood.

He had forgotten, of course, that there would be messages on thetape other than his own, and listening to other people's phone messageswas tantamount to opening their mail.

He explained to himself once again that all he was trying to dowas to undo a mistake he had made before it caused any irrevocabledamage. He would just play the tiniest snippets till he found his ownvoice. That wouldn't be too bad, he wouldn't even be able todistinguish what was being said.

He groaned inwardly, gritted his teeth and stabbed at the Playbutton so roughly that he missed it and ejected the cassette bymistake. He put it back in and pushed the Play button more carefully.

Beep.

"Oh, Susan, hi, it's Gordon," said the answering machine. "I'mjust on my way to the cottage. It's, er…" He wound on for a couple ofseconds. "…need to know that Richard is on the case. I mean reallyon…" Richard set his mouth grimly and stabbed at the Fast Forwardagain. He really hated the fact that Gordon tried to put pressure onhim via Susan, which Gordon always stoutly denied he did. Richardcouldn't blame Susan for getting exasperated about his work sometimesif this sort of thing was going on."

Click.

"…Response. Make a note to Susan would you please, to get an"Armed Response" sign made up with a sharp spike on the bottom at theright height for rabbits to see."

“What?” muttered Richard to himself, and his finger hesitated fora second over the Fast Forward button. He had a feeling that Gordondesperately wanted to be like Howard Hughes, and if he could never hopeto be remotely as rich, he could at least try to be twice as eccentric.An act. A palpable act.

“That’s secretary Susan at the office, not you, of course,”continued Gordon’s voice on the answering machine. “Where was I? Ohyes. Richard and Anthem 2.00. Susan, that thing has got to be in betatesting in two…” Richard stabbed at the Fast Forward, tight-lipped.

“…point is that there’s only one person who’s really in aposition to know if he’s getting the important work done, or if he’sjust dreaming, and that one person…” He stabbed angrily again. He hadpromised himself he wouldn’t listen to any of it and now here he wasgetting angry at what he was hearing. He should really just stop this.Well, just one more try.

When he listened again he just got music. Odd. He wound forwardagain, and still got music. Why would someone be phoning to play musicto an answering machine? he wondered.

The phone rang. He stopped the tape and answered it, then almostdropped the phone like an electric eel as he realised what he wasdoing. Hardly daring to breathe, he held the telephone to his ear.

“Rule One in housebreaking,” said a voice. “Never answer the telephone when you’re in the middle of a job. Who are you supposed tobe, for heaven’s sake?”

Richard froze. It was a moment or two before he could find where he had put his voice.

“Who is this?” he demanded at last in a whisper.

“Rule Two,” continued the voice. “Preparation. Bring the righttools. Bring gloves. Try to have the faintest glimmering of an idea ofwhat you’re about before you start dangling from window ledges in themiddle of the night.

“Rule Three. Never forget Rule Two.”

“Who is this?” exclaimed Richard again.

The voice was unperturbed. “Neighbourhood Watch,” it said. “Ifyou just look out of the back window you’ll see…”

Trailing the phone, Richard hurried over to the window and lookedout. A distant flash startled him.

“Rule Four. Never stand where you can be photographed.

“Rule Five…Are you listening to me, MacDuff?”

“What? Yes…” said Richard in bewilderment. “How do you knowme?”

“Rule Five. Never admit to your name.”

Richard stood silent, breathing hard.

"I run a little course," said the voice, "if you'reinterested…"

Richard said nothing.

"You're learning," continued the voice, "slowly, but you'relearning. If you were learning fast you would have put the phone downby now, of course. But you're curious — and incompetent — and so youdon't. I don't run a course for novice burglars as it happens, temptingthough the idea is. I'm sure there would be grants available. If wehave to have them they may as well be trained.

"However, if I did run such a course I would allow you to enrolfor free, because I too am curious. Curious to know why Mr RichardMacDuff who, I am given to understand, is now a wealthy young man,something in the computer industry, I believe, should suddenly beneeding to resort to house-breaking."

"Who — ?"

"So I do a little research, phone Directory Enquiries anddiscover that the flat into which he is breaking is that of a Miss S.Way. I know that Mr Richard MacDuff's employer is the famous Mr G. Wayand I wonder if they can by any chance be related."

"Who — ?"

"You are speaking with Svlad, commonly known as "Dirk" Cjelli,currently trading under the name of Gently for reasons which it wouldbe otiose, at this moment, to rehearse. I bid you good evening. If youwish to know more I will be at the Pizza Express in Upper Street in tenminutes. Bring some money."

"Dirk?" exclaimed Richard. "You…Are you trying to blackmailme?"

"No, you fool, for the pizzas." There was a click and Dirk Gentlyrang off.

Richard stood transfixed for a moment or two, wiped his foreheadagain, and gently replaced the phone as if it were an injured hamster.His brain began to buzz gently and suck its thumb. Lots of littlesynapses deep inside his cerebral cortex all joined hands and starteddancing around and singing nursery rhymes. He shook his head to try andmake them stop, and quickly sat down at the answering machine again.

He fought with himself over whether or not he was going to push the Play button again, and then did so anyway before he had made up hismind. Hardly four seconds of light orchestral music had oozedsoothingly past when there came the sound of a key scratching in thelock out in the hallway.

In panic Richard thumped the Eject button, popped the

cassetteout, rammed it into his jeans pocket and replaced it from the pile offresh cassettes that lay next to the machine. There was a similar pilenext to his own machine at home. Susan at the office provided them -?poor, long-suffering Susan at the office. He must remember to feelsympathy for her in the morning, when he had the time and concentrationfor it.

Suddenly, without even noticing himself doing it, he changed hismind. In a flash he popped the substitute cassette out of the machineagain, replaced the one he had stolen, rammed down the rewind buttonand made a lunge for the sofa where, with two seconds to go before thedoor opened, he tried to arrange himself into a nonchalant and winningposture. On an impulse he stuck his left hand up behind his back whereit might come in useful.

He was just trying to arrange his features into an expressioncomposed in equal parts of contrition, cheerfulness and sexualallurement when the door opened and in walked Michael Wenton-Weakes.

Everything stopped.

Outside, the wind ceased. Owls halted in mid-flight. Well, maybethey did, maybe they didn't, certainly the central heating chose thatmoment to shut down, unable perhaps to cope with the supernatural chillthat suddenly whipped through the room.

"What are you doing here, Wednesday?" demanded Richard. He rosefrom the sofa as if levitated with anger.

Michael Wenton-Weakes was a large sad-faced man known by somepeople as Michael Wednesday-Week, because that was when he usuallypromised to have things done by. He was dressed in a suit that had beensuperbly well tailored when his father, the late Lord Magna, had boughtit forty years previously.

Michael Wenton-Weakes came very high on the small but select listof people whom Richard thoroughly disliked.

He disliked him because he found the idea of someone who was not only privileged, but was also sorry for himself because he thought theworld didn't really understand the problems of privileged people,deeply obnoxious. Michael, on the other hand, disliked Richard for thefairly simple reason that Richard disliked him and made no secret ofit.

Michael gave a slow and lugubrious look back out into the hallwayas Susan walked through. She stopped when she saw Richard. She put downher handbag, unwound her scarf, unbuttoned her coat, slipped it off,handed it to Michael, walked over to Richard and smacked him in theface.

"I've been saving that up all evening," she said furiously. "Anddon't try and pretend that's a bunch of flowers you've

forgotten tobring which you're hiding behind your back. You tried that gag lasttime." She turned and stalked off.

"It's a box of chocolates I forgot this time," said Richardglumly and held out his empty hand to her retreating back. "I climbedup the entire outside wall without them. Did I feel a fool when I gotin."

"Not very funny," said Susan. She swept into the kitchen andsounded as if she was grinding coffee with her bare hands. For someonewho always looked so neat and sweet and delicate she packed a hell of a temper.

"It's true," said Richard, ignoring Michael completely. "I nearlykilled myself."

"I'm not going to rise to that," said Susan from within thekitchen. "If you want something big and sharp thrown at you why don'tyou come in here and be funny?"

"I suppose it would be pointless saying I'm sorry at this point,"Richard called out.

"You bet," said Susan, sweeping back out of the kitchen again.She looked at him with her eyes flashing, and actually stamped herfoot.

"Honestly, Richard," she said, "I suppose you're going to say youforgot again. How can you have the gall to stand there with two arms,two legs and a head as if you're a human being? This is behaviour thata bout of amoebic dysentery would be ashamed of. I bet that even thevery lowest form of dysentery amoeba shows up to take its girlfriendout for a quick trot around the stomach lining once in a while. Well, Ihope you had a lousy evening."

"I did," said Richard. "You wouldn't have liked it. There was ahorse in the bathroom, and you know how you hate that sort of thing."

"Oh, Michael," said Susan brusquely, "don't just stand there likea sinking pudding. Thank you very much for dinner and the concert, youwere very sweet and I did enjoy listening to your troubles all eveningbecause they were such a nice change from mine. But I think it would bebest if I just found your book and pushed you out. I've got someserious jumping up and down and ranting to do, and I know how it upsetsyour delicate sensibilities."

She retrieved her coat from him and hung it up. While he had beenholding it he had seemed entirely taken up with this task and obliviousto anything else. Without it he seemed a little lost and naked and wasforced to stir himself back into life. He turned his big heavy eyesback on Richard.

"Richard," he said, "I, er, read your piece in…in Fathom.

OnMusic and, er…"

"Fractal Landscapes," said Richard shortly. He didn't want totalk to Michael, and he certainly didn't want to get drawn into aconversation about Michael's wretched magazine. Or rather, the magazinethat used to be Michael's.

That was the precise aspect of the conversation that Richarddidn't want to get drawn into.

"Er, yes. Very interesting, of course," said Michael in hissilky, over-rounded voice. "Mountain shapes and tree shapes and allsorts of things. Recycled algae."

"Recursive algorithms."

"Yes, of course. Very interesting. But so wrong, so terriblywrong. For the magazine, I mean. It is, after all, an arts review. Iwould never have allowed such a thing, of course. Ross has utterlyruined it. Utterly. He'll have to go. Have to. He has no sensibilitiesand he's a thief."

"He's not a thief, Wednesday, that's absolutely absurd," snappedRichard, instantly getting drawn into it in spite of his resolution notto. "He had nothing to do with your getting the push whatsoever. Thatwas your own silly fault, and you…"

There was a sharp intake of breath.

"Richard," said Michael in his softest, quietest voice — arguingwith him was like getting tangled in parachute silk — "I think you donot understand how important…"

"Michael," said Susan gently but firmly, holding open the door.Michael Wenton-Weakes nodded faintly and seemed to deflate.

"Your book," Susan added, holding out to him a small and elderlyvolume on the ecclesiastical architecture of Kent. He took it, murmuredsome slight thanks, looked about him for a moment as if he'd suddenlyrealised something rather odd, then gathered himself together, noddedfarewell and left.

Richard didn't appreciate quite how tense he had become tillMichael left and he was suddenly able to relax. He'd always resentedthe indulgent soft spot that Susan had for Michael even if she did tryto disguise it by being terribly rude to him all the time. Perhaps evenbecause of that.

"Susan, what can I say…?" he started lamely.

"You could say "Ouch" for a start. You didn't even give me thatsatisfaction when I hit you, and I thought I did it rather hard. God,it's freezing in here. What's that window doing wide open?"

She went over to shut it.

"I told you. That's how I got in," said Richard.

He sounded sufficiently as if he meant it to make her look

roundat him in surprise.

"Really," he said. "Like in the chocolate ads, only I forgot thebox of chocolates…" He shrugged sheepishly.

She stared at him in amazement.

"What on earth possessed you to do that?" she said. She stuck herhead out of the window and looked down. "You could have got killed,"she said, turning back to him.

"Well, er, yes…" he said. "It just seemed the only way to… Idon't know." He rallied himself. "You took your key back remember?"

"Yes. I got fed up with you coming and raiding my larder when youcouldn't be bothered to do your own shopping. Richard, you reallyclimbed up this wall?"

"Well, I wanted to be here when you got in."

She shook her head in bewilderment. "It would have been a greatdeal better if you'd been here when I went out. Is that why you'rewearing those filthy old clothes?"

"Yes. You don't think I went to dinner at St Cedd's like this?"

"Well, I no longer know what you consider to be rationalbehaviour." She sighed and fished about in a small drawer. "Here," shesaid, "if it's going to save your life," and handed him a couple ofkeys on a ring. "I'm too tired to be angry anymore. An evening of beinglobbied by Michael has taken it out of me."

"Well, I'll never understand why you put up with him," saidRichard, going to fetch the coffee.

"I know you don't like him, but he's very sweet and can becharming in his sad kind of way. Usually it's very relaxing to be withsomeone who's so self-absorbed, because it doesn't make any demands onyou. But he's obsessed with the idea that I can do something about hismagazine. I can't, of course. Life doesn't work like that. I do feelsorry for him, though."

"I don't. He's had it very, very easy all his life. He still hasit very, very easy. He's just had his toy taken away from him that'sall. It's hardly unjust, is it?"

"It's not a matter of whether it's just or not. I feel sorry forhim because he's unhappy."

"Well, of course he's unhappy. Al Ross has turned Fathom into areally sharp, intelligent magazine that everyone suddenly wants toread. It was just a bumbling shambles before. Its only real function was to let Michael have lunch and toady about with whoever he liked onthe pretext that maybe they might like to write a little something. Hehardly ever got an actual issue out. The whole thing was a sham. Hepampered himself with it. I really

don't find that charming orengaging. I'm sorry, I'm going on about it and I didn't mean to."

Susan shrugged uneasily.

"I think you overreact," she said, "though I think I will have tosteer clear of him if he's going to keep on at me to do something Isimply can't do. It's too exhausting. Anyway, listen, I'm glad you hada lousy evening. I want to talk about what we were going to do thisweekend."

"Ah," said Richard, "well…"

"Oh, I'd better just check the messages first."

She walked past him to the telephone-answering machine, playedthe first few seconds of Gordon's message and then suddenly ejected thecassette.

"I can't be bothered," she said, giving it to him. "Could youjust give this straight to Susan at the office tomorrow? Save her atrip. If there's anything important on it she can tell me."

Richard blinked, said, "Er, yes," and pocketed the tape, tinglingwith the shock of the reprieve.

"Anyway, the weekend — " said Susan, sitting down on the sofa.

Richard wiped his hand over his brow. "Susan, I…"

"I'm afraid I've got to work. Nicola's sick and I'm going to haveto dep for her at the Wigmore on Friday week. There's some Vivaldi andsome Mozart I don't know too well, so that means a lot of extrapractice this weekend, I'm afraid. Sorry."

"Well, in fact," said Richard, "I have to work as well." He satdown by her.

"I know. Gordon keeps on at me to nag you. I wish he wouldn't.It's none of my business and it puts me in an invidious position. I'mtired of being pressurised by people, Richard. At least you don't dothat."

She took a sip of her coffee.

"But I'm sure," she added, "that there's some kind of grey areabetween being pressurised and being completely forgotten about that I'dquite like to explore. Give me a hug."

He hugged her, feeling that he was monstrously and unworthilylucky. An hour later he let himself out and discovered that the PizzaExpress was closed.

Meanwhile, Michael Wenton-Weakes made his way back to his home inChelsea. As he sat in the back of the taxi he watched the streets with a blank stare and tapped his fingers lightly against the window in aslow thoughtful rhythm.

Rap tap tap a rap tap a rap a tap.

He was one of those dangerous people who are soft, squidgy

andcowlike provided they have what they want. And because he had alwayshad what he wanted, and had seemed easily pleased with it, it had neveroccurred to anybody that he was anything other than soft, squidgy andcowlike. You would have to push through a lot of soft squidgy bits inorder to find a bit that didn't give when you pushed it. That was thebit that all the soft squidgy bits were there to protect.

Michael Wenton-Weakes was the younger son of Lord Magna,publisher, newspaper owner and over-indulgent father, under whoseprotective umbrella it had pleased Michael to run his own littlemagazine at a magnificent loss. Lord Magna had presided over the gradual but dignified and well-respected decline of the publishing

empire originally founded by his father, the first Lord Magna.

Michael continued to tap his knuckles lightly on the glass.

A rap tap a rap a tap.

He remembered the appalling, terrible day when his father hadelectrocuted himself changing a plug, and his mother, his mother, tookover the business. Not only took it over but started running it withcompletely unexpected verve and determination. She examined the companywith a very sharp eye as to how it was being run, or walked, as she putit, and eventually even got around to looking at the accounts ofMichael's magazine.

Tap tap tap.

Now Michael knew just enough about the business side of things toknow what the figures ought to be, and he had simply assured his fatherthat that was indeed what they were.

"Can't allow this job just to be a sinecure, you must see that,old fellow, you have to pay your way or how would it look, how would itbe?" his father used to say, and Michael would nod seriously, and startthinking up the figures for next month, or whenever it was he wouldnext manage to get an issue out.

His mother, on the other hand, was not so indulgent. Not by alorryload.

Michael usually referred to his mother as an old battleaxe, butif she was fairly to be compared to a battleaxe it would only be to anexquisitely crafted, beautifully balanced battleaxe, with an elegantminimum of fine engraving which stopped just short of its gleamingrazored edge. One swipe from such an instrument and you wouldn't evenknow you'd been hit until you tried to look at your watch a bit laterand discovered that your arm wasn't on.

She had been waiting patiently — or at least with the appearanceof patience — in the wings all this time, being the devoted wife, thedoting but strict mother. Now someone had

taken her — to switchmetaphors for a moment — out of her scabbard and everyone was runningfor cover.

Including Michael.

It was her firm belief that Michael, whom she quietly adored, hadbeen spoiled in the fullest and worst sense of the word, and she wasdetermined, at this late stage, to stop it.

It didn't take her more than a few minutes to see that he had been simply making up the figures every month, and that the magazinewas haemorrhaging money as Michael toyed with it, all the time runningup huge lunch bills, taxi accounts and staff costs that he wouldplayfully set against fictitious taxes. The whole thing had simply gotlost somewhere in the gargantuan accounts of Magna House.

She had then summoned Michael to see her.

Tap tap a rap a tappa.

"How do you want me to treat you," she said, "as my son or as theeditor of one of my magazines? I'm happy to do either."

"Your magazines? Well, I am your son, but I don't see…"

"Right. Michael, I want you to look at these figures," she saidbriskly, handing over a sheet of computer printout. "The ones on theleft show the actual incomings and outgoings of Fathom, the ones on theright are your own figures. Does anything strike you about them?"

"Mother, I can explain, I — "

"Good," said Lady Magna sweetly, "I'm very glad of that."

She took the piece of paper back. "Now. Do you have any views onhow the magazine should best be run in the future?"

"Yes, absolutely. Very strong ones. I — "

"Good," said Lady Magna, with a bright smile. "Well, that's allperfectly satisfactory, then."

"Don't you want to hear — ?"

"No, that's all right, dear. I'm just happy to know that you dohave something to say on the matter to clear it all up. I'm sure thenew owner of Fathom will be glad to listen to whatever it is."

"What?" said a stunned Michael. "You mean you're actually sellingFathom?"

"No. I mean I've already sold it. Didn't get much for it, I'mafraid. One pound plus a promise that you would be retained as editorfor the next three issues, and after that it's at the new owner'sdiscretion."

Michael stared, pop-eyed.

"Well, come now," said his mother reasonably, "we could hardlycontinue under the present arrangement, could we? You always agreedwith your father that the job should not be a

sinecure for you. Andsince I would have a great deal of difficulty in either believing orresisting your stories, I thought I would hand the problem on tosomeone with whom you could have a more objective relationship. Now, Ihave another appointment, Michael."

"Well, but…who have you sold it to?" spluttered Michael.

"Gordon Way."

"Gordon Way! But for heaven's sake, Mother, he's — "

"He's very anxious to be seen to patronise the arts. And I thinkI do mean patronise. I'm sure you'll get on splendidly, dear. Now, ifyou don't mind — "

Michael stood his ground.

"I've never heard of anything so outrageous! I — "

"Do you know, that's exactly what Mr Way said when I showed himthese figures and then demanded that you be kept on as editor for threeissues."

Michael huffed and puffed and went red and wagged his finger, butcould think of nothing more to say. Except, "What difference would ithave made to all this if I'd said treat me as the editor of one of yourmagazines?"

"Why, dear," said Lady Magna with her sweetest smile, "I wouldhave called you Mr Wenton-Weakes, of course. And I wouldn't now betelling you straighten your tie," she added, with a tiny little gestureunder her chin.

Rap tap tap rap tap tap.

"Number seventeen, was it, guv?"

"Er…what?" said Michael, shaking his head.

"It was seventeen you said, was it?" said the cab driver, "'Causewe're "ere."

"Oh. Oh, yes, thank you," said Michael. He climbed out andfumbled in his pocket for some money.

"Tap tap tap, eh?"

"What?" said Michael handing over the fare.

"Tap tap tap," said the cab driver, "all the bloody way here. Gotsomething on your mind, eh, mate?"

"Mind your own bloody business," snapped Michael savagely.

"If you say so, mate. Just thought you might be going mad orsomething," said the cabbie and drove off.

Michael let himself into his house and walked through the coldhall to the dining room, turned on the overhead light and poured himself a brandy from the decanter. He took off his coat, threw itacross the large mahogany dining table and pulled a chair over to thewindow where he sat nursing his drink and his grievances.

Tap tap tap, he went on the window.

He had sullenly remained as editor for the stipulated threeissues and was then, with little ceremony, let go. A new editor wasfound, a certain A. K. Ross, who was young, hungry and ambitious, andhe quickly turned the magazine into a resounding success. Michael, inthe meantime, had been lost and naked. There was nothing else for him.

He tapped on the window again and looked, as he frequently did,at the small table lamp that stood on the sill. It was a rather ugly,ordinary little lamp, and the only thing about it that regularlytransfixed his attention was that this was the lamp that hadelectrocuted his father, and this was where he had been sitting.

The old boy was such a fool with anything technical. Michaelcould just see him peering with profound concentration through his halfmoons and sucking his moustache as he tried to unravel the arcanecomplexities of a thirteen-amp plug. He had, it seemed, plugged it backin the wall without first screwing the cover back on and then tried tochange the fuse in situ. From this he received the shock which hadstilled his already dicky heart.

Such a simple, simple error, thought Michael, such as anyonecould have made, anyone, but the consequences of it were catastrophic.Utterly catastrophic. His father's death, his own loss, the rise of theappalling Ross and his disastrously successful magazine and…

Tap tap tap.

He looked at the window, at his own reflection, and at the darkshadows of the bushes on the other side of it. He looked again at thelamp. This was the very object, this the very place, and the error wassuch a simple one. Simple to make, simple to prevent.

The only thing that separated him from that simple moment was theinvisible barrier of the months that had passed in between.

A sudden, odd calm descended on him as if something inside himhad suddenly been resolved.

Tap tap tap.

Fathom was his. It wasn't meant to be a success, it was his life.His life had been taken from him, and that demanded a response.

Tap tap tap crack.

He surprised himself by suddenly punching his hand through thewindow and cutting himself quite badly.

Dirk Gently 1 - Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency

CHAPTER 15

Some of the less pleasant aspects of being dead were beginning tocreep up on Gordon Way as he stood in front of his “cottage”.

It was in fact a rather large house by anybody else’s standardsbut he had always wanted to have a cottage in the country and so whenthe time came for him finally to buy one and he discovered that he hadrather more money available than he had ever seriously believed hemight own, he bought a large old rectory and called it a cottage inspite of its seven bedrooms and its four acres of dank Cambridgeshireland. This did little to endear him to people who only had cottages,but then if Gordon Way had allowed his actions to be governed by whatendeared him to people he wouldn’t have been Gordon Way.

He wasn’t, of course, Gordon Way any longer. He was the ghost ofGordon Way.

In his pocket he had the ghosts of Gordon Way’s keys.

It was this realisation that had stopped him for a moment in hisinvisible tracks. The idea of walking through walls frankly revoltedhim. It was something he had been trying strenuously to avoid allnight. He had instead been fighting to grip and grapple with everyobject he touched in order to render it, and thereby himself,substantial. To enter his house, his own house, by any means other thanthat of opening the front door and striding in in a proprietorialmanner filled him with a hurtling sense of loss.

He wished, as he stared at it, that the house was not such anextreme example of Victorian Gothic, and that the moonlight didn’t playso coldly on its narrow gabled windows and its forbidding turrets. Hehad joked, stupidly, when he bought it that it looked as if it ought tobe haunted, not realising that one day it would be — or by whom.

A chill of the spirit gripped him as he made his way silently upthe driveway, lined by the looming shapes of yew trees that were farolder than the rectory itself. It was a disturbing thought that anybodyelse might be scared walking up such a driveway on such a night forfear of meeting something such as him.

Behind a screen of yew trees off to his left stood the gloomybulk of the old church, decaying now, only used in rotation with othersin neighbouring villages and presided over by a vicar who was alwaysbreathless from bicycling there and dispirited by the few who werewaiting for him when he arrived. Behind the steeple of the church hungthe cold eye of the moon.

A glimpse of movement seemed suddenly to catch his eye, as if afigure had moved in the bushes near the house, but it was, he toldhimself, only his imagination, overwrought by the strain of being dead.What was there here that he could possibly be afraid of?

He continued onwards, around the angle of the wing of therectory, towards the front door set deep within its gloomy porchwreathed in ivy. He was suddenly startled to realise that there waslight coming from within the house. Electric light and also the dimflicker of firelight.

It was a moment or two before he realised that he was, of course,expected that night, though hardly in his present form. Mrs Bennett,the elderly housekeeper, would have been in to make the bed, light thefire and leave out a light supper for him.

The television, too, would be on, especially so that he couldturn it off impatiently upon entering.

His footsteps failed to crunch on the gravel as he approached.Though he knew that he must fail at the door, he nevertheless could notbut go there first, to try if he could open it, and only then, hiddenwithin the shadows of the porch, would he close his eyes and lethimself slip ashamedly through it. He stepped up to the door andstopped.

It was open.

Just half an inch, but it was open. His spirit fluttered infearful surprise. How could it be open? Mrs Bennett was always soconscientious about such things. He stood uncertainly for a moment andthen with difficulty exerted himself against the door. Under the littlepressure he could bring to bear on it, it swung slowly and unwillinglyopen, its hinges groaning in protest. He stepped through and slippedalong the stone-flagged hallway. A wide staircase led up into thedarkness, but the doors that led off from the hallway all stood closed.

The nearest door led into the drawing room, in which the fire wasburning, and from which he could hear the muted car chases of the late movie. He struggled futilely for a minute or two with its shiny brassdoor knob, but was forced in the end to admit a humiliating defeat, andwith a sudden rage flung himself straight at the door — and throughit.

The room inside was a picture of pleasant domestic warmth. Hestaggered violently into it, and was unable to stop himself floating onthrough a small occasional table set with thick sandwiches and aThermos flask of hot coffee, through a large overstuffed armchair, intothe fire, through the thick hot brickwork and into the cold dark diningroom beyond.

The connecting door back into the sitting room was also closed.Gordon fingered it numbly and then, submitting himself to theinevitable, braced himself, and slid back through it, calmly, gently,noticing for the first time the rich internal grain of the wood.

The coziness of the room was almost too much for Gordon, and hewandered distractedly around it, unable to settle, letting the warmliveliness of the firelight play through him. Him it couldn't warm.

What, he wondered, were ghosts supposed to do all night?

He sat, uneasily, and watched the television. Soon, however, thecar chases drifted peacefully to a close and there was nothing left butgrey snow and white noise, which he was unable to turn off.

He found he'd sunk too far into the chair and confused himself with bits of it as he pushed and pulled himself up. He tried to amusehimself by standing in the middle of a table, but it did little toalleviate a mood that was sliding inexorably from despondencydownwards.

Perhaps he would sleep.

Perhaps.

He felt no tiredness or drowsiness, but just a deadly craving foroblivion. He passed back through the closed door and into the darkhallway, from which the wide heavy stairs led to the large gloomybedrooms above.

Up these, emptily, he trod.

It was for nothing, he knew. If you cannot open the door to abedroom you cannot sleep in its bed. He slid himself through the doorand lifted himself on to the bed which he knew to be cold though hecould not feel it. The moon seemed unable to leave him alone and shone full on him as he lay there wide-eyed and empty, unable now to rememberwhat sleep was or how to do it.

The horror of hollowness lay on him, the horror of lyingceaselessly and forever awake at four o'clock in the morning.

He had nowhere to go, nothing to do when he got there, and no onehe could go and wake up who wouldn't be utterly horrified to see him.

The worst moment had been when he had seen Richard on the road,Richard's face frozen white in the windscreen. He saw again his face,and that of the pale figure next to him.

That had been the thing which had shaken out of him the lingeringshred of warmth at the back of his mind which said that this was just atemporary problem. It seemed terrible in the night hours, but would beall right in the morning when he could see

people and sort things out.He fingered the memory of the moment in his mind and could not let itgo.

He had seen Richard and Richard, he knew, had seen him.

It was not going to be all right.

Usually when he felt this bad at night he popped downstairs tosee what was in the fridge, so he went now. It would be more cheerfulthan this moonlit bedroom. He would hang around the kitchen going bump in the night.

He slid down — and partially through — the banisters, waftedthrough the kitchen door without a second thought and then devoted allhis concentration and energy for about five minutes to getting thelight switch on.

That gave him a real sense of achievement and he determined tocelebrate with a beer.

After a minute or two of repeatedly juggling and dropping a canof Fosters he gave it up. He had not the slightest conception of how hecould manage to open a ring pull, and besides the stuff was all shakenup by now — and what was he going to do with the stuff even if he didget it open?

He didn't have a body to keep it in. He hurled the can away fromhim and it scuttled off under a cupboard.

He began to notice something about himself, which was the way inwhich his ability to grasp things seemed to grow and fade in a slowrhythm, as did his visibility.

There was an irregularity in the rhythm, though, or perhaps itwas just that sometimes the effects of it would be much more pronouncedthan at others. That, too, seemed to vary according to a slower rhythm.Just at that moment it seemed to him that his strength was on theincrease.

In a sudden fever of activity he tried to see how many things inthe kitchen he could move or use or somehow get to work.

He pulled open cupboards, he yanked out drawers, scatteringcutlery on the floor. He got a brief whirr out of the food processor,he knocked over the electric coffee grinder without getting it to work,he turned on the gas on the cooker hob but then couldn't light it, hesavaged a loaf of bread with a carving knife. He tried stuffing lumpsof bread into his mouth, but they simply fell through his mouth to thefloor. A mouse appeared, but scurried from the room, its coat electricwith fear.

Eventually he stopped and sat at the kitchen table, emotionallyexhausted but physically numb.

How, he wondered, would people react to his death?

Who would be most sorry to know that he had gone?

For a while there would be shock, then sadness, then they

wouldadjust, and he would be a fading memory as people got on with their ownlives without him, thinking that he had gone on to wherever people go.That was a thought that filled him with the most icy dread.

He had not gone. He was still here.

He sat facing one cupboard that he hadn't managed to open yetbecause its handle was too stiff, and that annoyed him. He grappledawkwardly with a tin of tomatoes, then went over again to the largecupboard and attacked the handle with the tin. The door flew open andhis own missing bloodstained body fell horribly forward out of it.

Gordon hadn't realised up till this point that it was possiblefor a ghost to faint.

He realised it now and did it.

He was woken a couple of hours later by the sound of his gascooker exploding.

Dirk Gently 1 - Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency

CHAPTER 16

The following morning Richard woke up twice.The first time he assumed he had made a mistake and turned over

for a fitful few minutes more. The second time he sat up with a jolt asthe events of the previous night insisted themselves upon him.

He went downstairs and had a moody and unsettled breakfast,during which nothing went right. He burned the toast, spilled thecoffee, and realised that though he'd meant to buy some more marmaladeyesterday, he hadn't. He surveyed his feeble attempt at feeding himselfand thought that maybe he could at least allow himself the time to takeSusan out for an amazing meal tonight, to make up for last night.

If he could persuade her to come.

There was a restaurant that Gordon had been enthusing about atgreat length and recommending that they try. Gordon was pretty good onrestaurants — he certainly seemed to spend enough time in them. He satand tapped his teeth with a pencil for a couple of minutes, and thenwent up to his workroom and lugged a telephone directory out from undera pile of computer magazines.

L'Esprit d'Escalier.

He phoned the restaurant and tried to book a table, but when hesaid when he wanted it for this seemed to cause a little amusement.

"Ah, non, m'sieur," said the maitre d", "I regret that it isimpossible. At this moment it is necessary to make reservations atleast three weeks in advance. Pardon, m'sieur."

Richard marvelled at the idea that there were people who actuallyknew what they wanted to do three weeks in advance, thanked the maitred" and rang off. Well, maybe a pizza again instead. This thoughtconnected back to the appointment he had failed to keep last night, andafter a moment curiosity overcame him and he reached for the phone bookagain.

Gentleman…

Gentles…

Gentry.

There was no Gently at all. Not a single one. He found the otherdirectories, except for the S-Z book which his cleaning ladycontinually threw away for reasons he had never yet fathomed.

There was certainly no Cjelli, or anything like it. There was

noJently, no Dgently, no Djently, no Dzently, nor anything remotelysimilar. He wondered about Tjently, Tsentli or Tzentli and triedDirectory Enquiries, but they were out. He sat and tapped his teethwith a pencil again and watched his sofa slowly revolving on the screenof his computer.

How very peculiar it had been that it had only been hours earlierthat Reg had asked after Dirk with such urgency.

If you really wanted to find someone, how would you set about it,what would you do?

He tried phoning the police, but they were out too. Well, thatwas that. He had done all he could do for the moment short of hiring aprivate detective, and he had better ways of wasting his time andmoney. He would run into Dirk again, as he did every few years or so.

He found it hard to believe there were really such people,anyway, as private detectives.

What sort of people were they? What did they look like, where didthey work?

What sort of tie would you wear if you were a private detective?Presumably it would have to be exactly the sort of tie that peoplewouldn't expect private detectives to wear. Imagine having to sort outa problem like that when you'd just got up.

Just out of curiosity as much as anything else, and because theonly alternative was settling down to Anthem coding, he found himself leafing through the Yellow Pages.

Private Detectives — see Detective Agencies.

The words looked almost odd in such a solid and businesslike context. He flipped back through the book. Dry Cleaners, Dog Breeders,Dental Technicians, Detective Agencies…

At that moment the phone rang and he answered it, a littlecurtly. He didn't like being interrupted.

"Something wrong, Richard?"

"Oh, hi, Kate, sorry, no. I was…my mind was elsewhere."

Kate Anselm was another star programmer at WayForwardTechnologies. She was working on a long-term Artificial Intelligenceproject, the sort of thing that sounded like an absurd pipe dream untilyou heard her talking about it. Gordon needed to hear her talking aboutit quite regularly, partly because he was nervous about the money itwas costing and partly because, well, there was little doubt thatGordon liked to hear Kate talking anyway.

"I didn't want to disturb you," she said. "It's just I was tryingto contact Gordon and can't. There's no reply from London or thecottage, or his car or his bleeper. It's just that for someone

asobsessively in contact as Gordon it's a bit odd. You heard he's had aphone put in his isolation tank? True."

"I haven't spoken to him since yesterday," said Richard. Hesuddenly remembered the tape he had taken from Susan's answeringmachine, and hoped to God there wasn't anything more important inGordon's message than ravings about rabbits. He said, "I know he wasgoing to the cottage. Er, I don't know where he is. Have you tried — "Richard couldn't think of anywhere else to try — "…er. Good God."

"Richard?"

"How extraordinary…"

"Richard, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, Kate. Er, I've just read the most astounding thing."

"Really, what are you reading?"

"Well, the telephone directory, in fact…"

"Really? I must rush out and buy one. Have the film rights gone?"

"Look, sorry, Kate, can I get back to you? I don't know whereGordon is at the moment and — "

"Don't worry. I know how it is when you can't wait to turn thenext page. They always keep you guessing till the end, don't they? Itmust have been Zbigniew that did it. Have a good weekend." She hung up.

Richard hung up too, and sat staring at the box advertisementlying open in front of him in the Yellow Pages.

DIRK GENTLY'S HOLISTIC DETECTIVE AGENCY We solve the whole crime We find the whole personPhone today for the whole solution to your problem(Missing cats and messy divorces a speciality)33a Peckender St., London N1 01-354 9112

Peckender Street was only a few minutes' walk away. Richardscribbled down the address, pulled on his coat and trotted downstairs,stopping to make another quick inspection of the sofa. There must, hethought, be something terribly obvious that he was overlooking. Thesofa was jammed on a slight turn in the long narrow stairway. At thispoint the stairs were interrupted for a couple of yards of flatlanding, which corresponded with the position of the flat directly beneath Richard's. However, his inspection produced no new insights,and he eventually clambered on over it and out of the front door.

In Islington you can hardly hurl a brick without hitting threeantique shops, an estate agent and a bookshop.

Even if you didn't actually hit them you would certainly set offtheir burglar alarms, which wouldn't be turned off again till after theweekend. A police car played its regular game of

dodgems down UpperStreet and squealed to a halt just past him. Richard crossed the roadbehind it.

The day was cold and bright, which he liked. He walked across thetop of Islington Green, where winos get beaten up, past the site of theold Collins Music Hall which had got burnt down, and through CamdenPassage where American tourists get ripped off. He browsed among theantiques for a while and looked at a pair of earrings that he thoughtSusan would like, but he wasn't sure. Then he wasn't sure that he likedthem, got confused and gave up. He looked in at a bookshop, and on animpulse bought an anthology of Coleridge's poems since it was justlying there.

From here he threaded his way through the winding back streets,over the canal, past the council estates that lined the canal, througha number of smaller and smaller squares, till finally he reachedPeckender Street, which had turned out to be a good deal farther thanhe'd thought.

It was the sort of street where property developers in largeJaguars drive around at the weekend salivating. It was full of end-of?lease shops, Victorian industrial architecture and a short, decayinglate — Georgian terrace, all just itching to be pulled down so thatsturdy young concrete boxes could sprout in their places. Estate agentsroamed the area in hungry packs, eyeing each other warily, theirclipboards on a hair trigger.

Number 33, when he eventually found it neatly sandwiched between37 and 45, was in a poorish state of repair, but no worse than most ofthe rest.

The ground floor was a dusty travel agent's whose window wascracked and whose faded BOAC posters were probably now quite valuable.The doorway next to the shop had been painted bright red, not well, butat least recently. A push button next to the door said, in neatlypencilled lettering, "Dominique, French lessons, 3rd Floor".

The most striking feature of the door, however, was the bold andshiny brass plaque fixed in the dead centre of it, on which wasengraved the legend "Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency".

Nothing else. It looked brand new — even the screws that held itin place were still shiny.

The door opened to Richard's push and he peered inside.

He saw a short and musty hallway which contained little but thestairway that led up from it. A door at the back of the hall showedlittle sign of having been opened in recent years, and had stacks ofold metal shelving, a fish tank and the carcass of a bike piled upagainst it. Everything else, the walls, the floor, the

stairsthemselves, and as much of the rear door as could be got at, had beenpainted grey in an attempt to smarten it up cheaply, but it was all nowbadly scuffed, and little cups of fungus were peeking from a damp stainnear the ceiling.

The sounds of angry voices reached him, and as he started up thestairs he was able to disentangle the noises of two entirely separatebut heated arguments that were going on somewhere above him.

One ended abruptly — or at least half of it did — as an angry overweight man came clattering down the stairs pulling his raincoatcollar straight. The other half of the argument continued in a torrentof aggrieved French from high above them. The man pushed past Richard,said, “Save your money, mate, it’s a complete washout,” and disappearedout into the chilly morning.

The other argument was more muffled. As Richard reached the firstcorridor a door slammed somewhere and brought that too to an end. Helooked into the nearest open doorway.

It led into a small ante-office. The other, inner door leadingfrom it was firmly closed. A youngish plump-faced girl in a cheap bluecoat was pulling sticks of make-up and boxes of Kleenex out of her deskdrawer and thrusting them into her bag.

“Is this the detective agency?” Richard asked her tentatively.

The girl nodded, biting her lip and keeping her head down.

“And is Mr Gently in?”

“He may be,” she said, throwing back her hair, which was toocurly for throwing back properly, “and then again he may not be. I amnot in a position to tell. It is not my business to know of hiswhereabouts. His whereabouts are, as of now, entirely his ownbusiness.”

She retrieved her last pot of nail varnish and tried to slam thedrawer shut. A fat book sitting upright in the drawer prevented it fromclosing. She tried to slam the drawer again, without success. Shepicked up the book, ripped out a clump of pages and replaced it. Thistime she was able to slam the drawer with ease.

“Are you his secretary?” asked Richard.

“I am his ex-secretary and I intend to stay that way,” she said,firmly snapping her bag shut. “If he intends to spend his money onstupid expensive brass plaques rather than on paying me, then let him.But I won’t stay to stand for it, thank you very much. Good forbusiness, my foot. Answering the phones properly is good for businessand I’d like to see his fancy brass plaque do that. If you’ll excuse meI’d like to storm out, please.”

Richard stood aside, and out she stormed.

“And good riddance!” shouted a voice from the inner office. Aphone rang and was picked up immediately.

“Yes?” answered the voice from the inner office, testly. The girlpopped back for her scarf, but quietly, so her ex-employer wouldn’thear. Then she was finally gone.

“Yes, Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency. How can we be ofhelp to you?”

The torrent of French from upstairs had ceased. A kind of tensecalm descended.

Inside, the voice said, “That’s right, Mrs Sunderland, messydivorces are our particular speciality.”

There was a pause.

“Yes, thank you, Mrs Sunderland, not quite that messy.” Down wentthe phone again, to be replaced instantly by the ringing of anotherone.

Richard looked around the grim little office. There was verylittle in it. A battered chipboard veneer desk, an old grey filingcabinet and a dark green tin wastepaper bin. On the wall was a DuranDuran poster on which someone had scrawled in fat red felt tip, “Takethis down please”.

Beneath that another hand had scrawled, “No”.

Beneath that again the first hand had written, “I insist that youtake it down”.

Beneath that the second hand had written, “Won’t!”

Beneath that — “You’re fired”.

Beneath that — “Good!”

And there the matter appeared to have rested.

He knocked on the inner door, but was not answered. Instead thevoice continued, “I’m very glad you asked me that, Mrs Rawlinson. Theterm “holistic” refers to my conviction that what we are concerned withhere is the fundamental interconnectedness of all things. I do notconcern myself with such petty things as fingerprint powder, telltalepieces of pocket fluff and inane footprints. I see the solution to eachproblem as being detectable in the pattern and web of the whole. Theconnections between causes and effects are often much more subtle and complex than we with our rough and ready understanding of the physicalworld might naturally suppose, Mrs Rawlinson.

“Let me give you an example. If you go to an acupuncturist withtoothache he sticks a needle instead into your thigh. Do you know whyhe does that, Mrs Rawlinson?

“No, neither do I, Mrs Rawlinson, but we intend to find out. Apleasure talking to you, Mrs Rawlinson. Goodbye.”

Another phone was ringing as he put this one down.

Richard eased the door open and looked in.

It was the same Svlad, or Dirk, Cjelli. Looking a little rounderabout the middle, a little looser and redder about the eyes and theneck, but it was still essentially the same face that he rememberedmost vividly smiling a grim smile as its owner climbed into the back ofone of the Black Marias of the Cambridgeshire constabulary, eight yearspreviously.

He wore a heavy old light brown suit which looked as if it hasbeen worn extensively for bramble hacking expeditions in some distantand better past, a red checked shirt which failed entirely to harmonisewith the suit, and a green striped tie which refused to speak to eitherof them. He also wore thick metal-rimmed spectacles, which probablyaccounted at least in part for his dress sense.

"Ah, Mrs Bluthall, how thoroughly uplifting to hear from you," hewas saying. "I was so distressed to learn that Miss Tiddles has passedover. This is desperate news indeed. And yet, and yet… Should we allowblack despair to hide from us the fairer light in which your blessedmoggy now forever dwells?

"I think not. Hark. I think I hear Miss Tiddles miaowing evennow. She calls to you, Mrs Bluthall. She says she is content, she is atpeace. She says she'll be even more at peace when you've paid some billor other. Does that ring a bell with you at all, Mrs Bluthall? Come tothink of it I think I sent you one myself not three months ago. Iwonder if it can be that which is disturbing her eternal rest."

Dirk beckoned Richard in with a brisk wave and then motioned him to pass the crumpled pack of French cigarettes that was sitting justout of his reach.

"Sunday night, then, Mrs Bluthall, Sunday night at eight-thirty.You know the address. Yes, I'm sure Miss Tiddles will appear, as I'msure will your cheque book. Till then, Mrs Bluthall, till then."

Another phone was already ringing as he got rid of Mrs Bluthall.He grabbed at it, lighting his crumpled cigarette at the same time.

"Ah, Mrs Sauskind," he said in answer to the caller, "my oldestand may I say most valued client. Good day to you, Mrs Sauskind, goodday. Sadly, no sign as yet of young Roderick, I'm afraid, but thesearch is intensifying as it moves into what I am confident are itsclosing stages, and I am sanguine that within mere days from today's date we will have the young rascal permanently restored to your armsand mewing prettily, ah yes the bill, I was wondering if you hadreceived it."

Dirk's crumpled cigarette turned out to be too crumpled to smoke,so he hooked the phone on his shoulder and poked around in the packetfor another, but it was empty.

He rummaged on his desk for a piece of paper and a stub of penciland wrote a note which he passed to Richard.

"Yes, Mrs Sauskind," he assured the telephone, "I am listeningwith the utmost attention."

The note said "Tell secretary get cigs".

"Yes," continued Dirk into the phone, "but as I have endeavouredto explain to you, Mrs Sauskind, over the seven years of ouracquaintance, I incline to the quantum mechanical view in this matter.My theory is that your cat is not lost, but that his waveform hastemporarily collapsed and must be restored. Schrodinger. Planck. And soon."

Richard wrote on the note "You haven't got secretary" and pushedit back.

Dirk considered this for a while, then wrote "Damn and blast" onthe paper and pushed it to Richard again.

"I grant you, Mrs Sauskind," continued Dirk blithely, "thatnineteen years is, shall we say, a distinguished age for a cat toreach, yet can we allow ourselves to believe that a cat such asRoderick has not reached it?

"And should we now in the autumn of his years abandon him to hisfate? This surely is the time that he most needs the support of ourcontinuing investigations. This is the time that we should redouble ourefforts, and with your permission, Mrs Sauskind, that is what I intendto do. Imagine, Mrs Sauskind, how you would face him if you had notdone this simple thing for him."

Richard fidgeted with the note, shrugged to himself, and wrote"I'll get them" on it and passed it back once more.

Dirk shook his head in admonition, then wrote "I couldn'tpossibly that would be most kind". As soon as Richard had read this,Dirk took the note back and added "Get money from secretary" to it.

Richard looked at the paper thoughtfully, took the pencil and puta tick next to where he had previously written "You haven't gotsecretary". He pushed the paper back across the table to Dirk, whomerely glanced at it and ticked "I couldn't possibly that would be mostkind".

"Well, perhaps," continued Dirk to Mrs Sauskind, "you could justrun over any of the areas in the bill that cause you difficulty. Justthe broader areas."

Richard let himself out.

Running down the stairs, he passed a young hopeful in a

denimjacket and close-cropped hair peering anxiously up the stairwell.

"Any good, mate?" he said to Richard.

"Amazing," murmured Richard, "just amazing."

He found a nearby newsagent's and picked up a couple of packetsof Disque Bleu for Dirk, and a copy of the new edition of PersonalComputer World, which had a picture of Gordon Way on the front.

"Pity about him, isn't it?" said the newsagent.

"What? Oh, er…yes," said Richard. He often thought the samehimself, but was surprised to find his feelings so widely echoed. Hepicked up a Guardian as well, paid and left.

Dirk was still on the phone with his feet on the table when Richard returned, and it was clear that he was relaxing into hisnegotiations.

"Yes, expenses were, well, expensive in the Bahamas, MrsSauskind, it is in the nature of expenses to be so. Hence the name." Hetook the proffered packets of cigarettes, seemed disappointed therewere only two, but briefly raised his eyebrows to Richard inacknowledgement of the favour he had done him, and then waved him to achair.

The sounds of an argument conducted partly in French drifted downfrom the floor above.

"Of course I will explain to you again why the trip to theBahamas was so vitally necessary," said Dirk Gently soothingly."Nothing could give me greater pleasure. I believe, as you know, MrsSauskind, in the fundamental interconnectedness of all things.Furthermore I have plotted and triangulated the vectors of theinterconnectedness of all things and traced them to a beach in Bermudawhich it is therefore necessary for me to visit from time to time inthe course of my investigations. I wish it were not the case, since,sadly, I am allergic to both the sun and rum punches, but then we allhave our crosses to bear, do we not, Mrs Sauskind?"

A babble seemed to break out from the telephone.

"You sadden me, Mrs Sauskind. I wish I could find it in my heartto tell you that I find your scepticism rewarding and invigorating, butwith the best will in the world I cannot. I am drained by it, MrsSauskind, drained. I think you will find an item in the bill to thateffect. Let me see."

He picked up a flimsy carbon copy lying near him.

"'Detecting and triangulating the vectors of interconnectednessof all things, one hundred and fifty pounds." We've dealt with that.

"'Tracing same to beach on Bahamas, fare and accommodation." Amere fifteen hundred. The accommodation was, of course, distressinglymodest.

"Ah yes, here we are, "Struggling on in the face of drainingscepticism from client, drinks — three hundred and twenty-seven poundsfifty."

"Would that I did not have to make such charges, my dear MrsSauskind, would that the occasion did not continually arise. Notbelieving in my methods only makes my job more difficult, Mrs Sauskind,and hence, regrettably, more expensive."

Upstairs, the sounds of argument were becoming more heated by themoment. The French voice seemed to be verging on hysteria.

"I do appreciate, Mrs Sauskind," continued Dirk, "that the costof the investigation has strayed somewhat from the original estimate,but I am sure that you will in your turn appreciate that a job whichtakes seven years to do must clearly be more difficult than one thatcan be pulled off in an afternoon and must therefore be charged at ahigher rate. I have continually to revise my estimate of how difficultthe task is in the light of how difficult it has so far proved to be."

The babble from the phone became more frantic.

"My dear Mrs Sauskind — or may I call you Joyce? Very well then.My dear Mrs Sauskind, let me say this. Do not worry yourself about thisbill, do not let it alarm or discomfit you. Do not, I beg you, let itbecome a source of anxiety to you. Just grit your teeth and pay it."

He pulled his feet down off the table and leaned forward over thedesk, inching the telephone receiver inexorably back towards itscradle.

"As always, the very greatest pleasure to speak with you, Mrs Sauskind. For now, goodbye."

He at last put down the receiver, picked it up again, and droppedit for the moment into the waste basket.

"My dear Richard MacDuff," he said, producing a large flat boxfrom under his desk and pushing it across the table at him, "yourpizza."

Richard started back in astonishment.

"Er, no thanks," he said, "I had breakfast. Please. You have it."

Dirk shrugged. "I told them you'd pop in and settle up over theweekend," he said. "Welcome, by the way, to my offices."

He waved a vague hand around the tatty surroundings.

"The light works," he said, indicating the window, "the gravityworks," he said, dropping a pencil on the floor. "Anything

else we haveto take our chances with."

Richard cleared his throat. "What," he said, "is this?"

"What is what?"

"This," exclaimed Richard, "all this. You appear to have aHolistic Detective Agency and I don't even know what one is."

"I provide a service that is unique in this world," said Dirk."The term "holistic" refers to my conviction that what we are concernedwith here is the fundamental interconnectedness of all — "

"Yes, I got that bit earlier," said Richard. "I have to say thatit sounded a bit like an excuse for exploiting gullible old ladies."

"Exploiting?" asked Dirk. "Well, I suppose it would be if anybodyever paid me, but I do assure you, my dear Richard, that there neverseems to be the remotest danger of that. I live in what are known ashopes. I hope for fascinating and remunerative cases, my secretaryhopes that I will pay her, her landlord hopes that she will producesome rent, the Electricity Board hopes that he will settle their bill,and so on. I find it a wonderfully optimistic way of life.

"Meanwhile I give a lot of charming and silly old ladiessomething to be happily cross about and virtually guarantee the freedomof their cats. Is there, you ask — and I put the question for youbecause I know you know I hate to be interrupted — is there a singlecase that exercises the tiniest part of my intellect, which, as youhardly need me to tell you, is prodigious? No. But do I despair? Am Idowncast? Yes. Until," he added, "today."

"Oh, well, I'm glad of that," said Richard, "but what was allthat rubbish about cats and quantum mechanics?"

With a sigh Dirk flipped up the lid of the pizza with a singleflick of practised fingers. He surveyed the cold round thing with akind of sadness and then tore off a hunk of it. Pieces of pepperoni andanchovy scattered over his desk.

"I am sure, Richard," he said, "that you are familiar with thenotion of Schrodinger's Cat," and he stuffed the larger part of thehunk into his mouth.

"Of course," said Richard. "Well, reasonably familiar."

"What is it?" said Dirk through a mouthful.

Richard shifted irritably in his seat. "It's an illustration," hesaid, "of the principle that at a quantum level all events are governedby probabilities…"

"At a quantum level, and therefore at all levels," interruptedDirk. "Though at any level higher than the subatomic the cumulativeeffect of those probabilities is, in the normal course

of events,indistinguishable from the effect of hard and fast physical laws.Continue."

He put some more cold pizza into his face.

Richard reflected that Dirk's was a face into which too much had

already been put. What with that and the amount he talked, the traffic through his mouth was almost incessant. His ears, on the other hand,remained almost totally unused in normal conversation.

It occurred to Richard that if Lamarck had been right and youwere to take a line through this behaviour for several generations, thechances were that some radical replumbing of the interior of the skullwould eventually take place.

Richard continued, "Not only are quantum level events governed byprobabilities, but those probabilities aren't even resolved into actualevents until they are measured. Or to use a phrase that I just heardyou use in a rather bizarre context, the act of measurement collapsesthe probability waveform. Up until that point all the possible coursesof action open to, say, an electron, coexist as probability waveforms.Nothing is decided. Until it's measured."

Dirk nodded. "More or less," he said, taking another mouthful."But what of the cat?"

Richard decided that there was only one way to avoid having towatch Dirk eat his way through all the rest of the pizza, and that wasto eat the rest himself. He rolled it up and took a token nibble offthe end. It was rather good. He took another bite.

Dirk watched this with startled dismay.

"So," said Richard, "the idea behind Schrodinger's Cat was to tryand imagine a way in which the effects of probabilistic behaviour at aquantum level could be considered at a macroscopic level. Or let's sayan everyday level."

"Yes, let's," said Dirk, regarding the rest of the pizza with astricken look. Richard took another bite and continued cheerfully.

"So you imagine that you take a cat and put it in a box that youcan seal completely. Also in the box you put a small lump ofradioactive material, and a phial of poison gas. You arrange it so thatwithin a given period of time there is an exactly fifty-fifty chancethat an atom in the radioactive lump will decay and emit an electron.If it does decay then it triggers the release of the gas and kills thecat. If it doesn't, the cat lives. Fifty-fifty. Depending on the fifty-fifty chance that a single atom does or does not decay.

"The point as I understand it is this: since the decay of asingle

atom is a quantum level event that wouldn't be resolved eitherway until it was observed, and since you don't make the observationuntil you open the box and see whether the cat is alive or dead, thenthere's a rather extraordinary consequence.

"Until you do open the box the cat itself exists in anindeterminate state. The possibility that it is alive, and thepossibility that it is dead, are two different waveforms superimposedon each other inside the box. Schrodinger put forward this idea toillustrate what he thought was absurd about quantum theory."

Dirk got up and padded over to the window, probably not so muchfor the meagre view it afforded over an old warehouse on which analternative comedian was lavishing his vast lager commercial feesdeveloping into luxury apartments, as for the lack of view it affordedof the last piece of pizza disappearing.

"Exactly," said Dirk, "bravo!"

"But what's all that got to do with this — this DetectiveAgency?"

"Oh, that. Well, some researchers were once conducting such anexperiment, but when they opened up the box, the cat was neither alivenor dead but was in fact completely missing, and they called me in to investigate. I was able to deduce that nothing very dramatic hadhappened. The cat had merely got fed up with being repeatedly locked upin a box and occasionally gassed and had taken the first opportunity tohoof it through the window. It was for me the work of a moment to set asaucer of milk by the window and call "Bernice" in an enticing voice -?the cat's name was Bernice, you understand — "

"Now, wait a minute — " said Richard.

" — and the cat was soon restored. A simple enough matter, butit seemed to create quite an impression in certain circles, and soonone thing led to another as they do and it all culminated in thethriving career you see before you."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," insisted Richard, slapping thetable.

"Yes?" enquired Dirk innocently.

"Now, what are you talking about, Dirk?"

"You have a problem with what I have told you?"

"Well, I hardly know where to begin," protested Richard. "Allright. You said that some people were performing the experiment. That'snonsense. Schrodinger's Cat isn't a real experiment. It's just anillustration for arguing about the idea. It's not something you'dactually do."

Dirk was watching him with odd attention.

“Oh, really?” he said at last. “And why not?”

“Well, there’s nothing you can test. The whole point of the ideais to think about what happens before you make your observation. Youcan’t know what’s going on inside the box without looking, and the veryinstant you look the wave packet collapses and the probabilitiesresolve. It’s self-defeating. It’s completely purposeless.”

“You are, of course, perfectly correct as far as you go,” repliedDirk, returning to his seat. He drew a cigarette out of the packet,tapped it several times on the desk, and leant across the desk andpointed the filter at Richard.

“But think about this,” he continued. “Supposing you were tointroduce a psychic, someone with clairvoyant powers, into theexperiment — someone who is able to divine what state of health thecat is in without opening the box. Someone who has, perhaps, a certaineerie sympathy with cats. What then? Might that furnish us with anadditional insight into the problem of quantum physics?”

“Is that what they wanted to do?”

“It’s what they did.”

“Dirk, this is complete nonsense.”

Dirk raised his eyebrows challengingly.

“All right, all right,” said Richard, holding up his palms,”let’s just follow it through. Even if I accepted — which I don’t forone second — that there was any basis at all for clairvoyance, itwouldn’t alter the fundamental undoableness of the experiment. As Isaid, the whole thing turns on what happens inside the box before it’sobserved. It doesn’t matter how you observe it, whether you look intothe box with your eyes or — well, with your mind, if you insist. Ifclairvoyance works, then it’s just another way of looking into the box,and if it doesn’t then of course it’s irrelevant.”

“It might depend, of course, on the view you take ofclairvoyance…”

“Oh yes? And what view do you take of clairvoyance? I should bevery interested to know, given your history.”

Dirk tapped the cigarette on the desk again and looked narrowlyat Richard.

There was a deep and prolonged silence, disturbed only by thesound of distant crying in French.

“I take the view I have always taken,” said Dirk eventually.

“Which is?”

“That I am not clairvoyant.”

“Really,” said Richard. “Then what about the exam papers?”

The eyes of Dirk Gently darkened at the mention of this subject.

“A coincidence,” he said, in a low, savage voice, “a strange andchilling coincidence, but none the less a coincidence. One, I mightadd, which caused me to spend a considerable time in prison.Coincidences can be frightening and dangerous things.”

Dirk gave Richard another of his long appraising looks.

“I have been watching you carefully,” he said. “You seem to beextremely relaxed for a man in your position.”

This seemed to Richard to be an odd remark, and he tried to makesense of it for a moment. Then the light dawned, and it was anaggravating light.

“Good heavens,” he said, “he hasn’t got to you as well, has he?”

This remark seemed to puzzle Dirk in return.

“Who hasn’t got to me?” he said.

“Gordon. No, obviously not. Gordon Way. He has this habit oftrying to get other people to bring pressure on me to get on with whathe sees as important work. I thought for a moment — oh, never mind.What did you mean, then?”

“Ah. Gordon Way has this habit, has he?”

“Yes. I don’t like it. Why?”

Dirk looked long and hard at Richard, tapping a pencil lightly onthe desk.

Then he leaned back in his chair and said as follows: “The bodyof Gordon Way was discovered before dawn this morning. He had beenshot, strangled, and then his house was set on fire. Police are workingon the theory that he was not actually shot in the house because noshotgun pellets were discovered there other than those in the body.

“However, pellets were found near to Mr Way’s Mercedes 500 SEC,which was found abandoned about three miles from his house. This suggests that the body was moved after the murder. Furthermore thedoctor who examined the body is of the opinion that Mr Way was in factstrangled after he was shot, which seems to suggest a certain confusionin the mind of the killer.

“By a startling coincidence it appears that the police last nighthad occasion to interview a very confused-seeming gentleman who saidthat he was suffering from some kind of guilt complex about having justrun over his employer.

“That man was a Mr Richard MacDuff, and his employer was thedeceased, Mr Gordon Way. It has further been suggested that Mr RichardMacDuff is one of the two people most likely to benefit from Mr Way’sdeath, since WayForward Technologies would

almost certainly pass atleast partly into his hands. The other person is his only livingrelative, Miss Susan Way, into whose flat Mr Richard MacDuff wasobserved to break last night. The police don't know that bit, ofcourse. Nor, if we can help it, will they. However, any relationshipbetween the two of them will naturally come under close scrutiny. Thenews reports on the radio say that they are urgently seeking MrMacDuff, who they believe will be able to help them with theirenquiries, but the tone of voice says that he's clearly guilty as hell.

"My scale of charges is as follows: two hundred pounds a day,plus expenses. Expenses are not negotiable and will sometimes strike those who do not understand these matters as somewhat tangential. Theyare all necessary and are, as I say, not negotiable. Am I hired?"

"Sorry," said Richard, nodding slightly. "Would you start thatagain?"

Dirk Gently 1 - Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency

CHAPTER 17

The Electric Monk hardly knew what to believe any more.

He had been through a bewildering number of belief systems in theprevious few hours, most of which had failed to provide him with thelong-term spiritual solace that it was his bounden programmingeternally to seek.

He was fed up. Frankly. And tired. And dispirited.

And furthermore, which caught him by surprise, he rather missedhis horse. A dull and menial creature, to be sure, and as such hardlyworthy of the preoccupation of one whose mind was destined forever toconcern itself with higher things beyond the understanding of a simplehorse, but nevertheless he missed it.

He wanted to sit on it. He wanted to pat it. He wanted to feelthat it didn't understand.

He wondered where it was.

He dangled his feet disconsolately from the branch of the tree inwhich he had spent the night. He had climbed it in pursuit of some wildfantastic dream and then had got stuck and had to stay there till themorning.

Even now, by daylight, he wasn't certain how he was going to getdown. He came for a moment perilously close to believing that he couldfly, but a quick-thinking error-checking protocol cut in and told himnot to be so silly.

It was a problem though.

Whatever burning fire of faith had borne him, inspired on wingsof hope, upwards through the branches of the tree in the magic hours ofnight, had not also provided him with instructions on how to get backdown again when, like altogether too many of these burning fiery night– time faiths, it had deserted him in the morning.

And speaking — or rather thinking — of burning fiery things,there had been a major burning fiery thing a little distance from herein the early pre-dawn hours.

It lay, he thought, in the direction from which he himself hadcome when he had been drawn by a deep spiritual compulsion towards thisinconveniently high but otherwise embarrassingly ordinary tree. He hadlonged to go and worship at the fire, to pledge himself eternally toits holy glare, but while he had been struggling hopelessly to find away downwards through the branches, fire engines had arrived and putthe divine radiance out, and that had been another creed out of thewindow.

The sun had been up for some hours now, and though he

hadoccupied the time as best as he could, believing in clouds, believingin twigs, believing in a peculiar form of flying beetle, he believednow that he was fed up, and was utterly convinced, furthermore, that hewas getting hungry.

He wished he'd taken the precaution of providing himself withsome food from the dwelling place he had visited in the night, to whichhe had carried his sacred burden for entombment in the holy broomcupboard, but he had left in the grip of a white passion, believingthat such mundane matters as food were of no consequence, that the tree would provide.

Well, it had provided.

It had provided twigs.

Monks did not eat twigs.

In fact, now he came to think of it, he felt a littleuncomfortable about some of the things he had believed last night andhad found some of the results a little confusing. He had been quiteclearly instructed to "shoot off" and had felt strangely compelled toobey but perhaps he had made a mistake in acting so precipitately on aninstruction given in a language he had learned only two minutes before.Certainly the reaction of the person he had shot off at had seemed alittle extreme.

In his own world when people were shot at like that they cameback next week for another episode, but he didn't think this personwould be doing that.

A gust of wind blew through the tree, making it sway giddily. Heclimbed down a little way. The first part was reasonably easy, sincethe branches were all fairly close together. It was the last bit thatappeared to be an insuperable obstacle — a sheer drop which couldcause him severe internal damage or rupture and might in turn cause himto start believing things that were seriously strange.

The sound of voices over in a distant corner of the field suddenly caught his attention. A lorry had pulled up by the side of theroad. He watched carefully for a moment, but couldn't see anythingparticular to believe in and so returned to his introspection.

There was, he remembered, an odd function call he had had lastnight, which he hadn't encountered before, but he had a feeling that itmight be something he'd heard of called remorse. He hadn't felt at allcomfortable about the way the person he had shot at had just lainthere, and after initially walking away the Monk had returned to haveanother look. There was definitely an expression on the person's facewhich seemed to suggest that something was up, that this didn't fit inwith the scheme of things.

The Monk worried that he might have badlyspoiled his evening.

Still, he reflected, so long as you did what you believed to beright, that was the main thing.

The next thing he had believed to be right was that havingspoiled this person's evening he should at least convey him to hishome, and a quick search of his pockets had produced an address, somemaps and some keys. The trip had been an arduous one, but he had beensustained on the way by his faith.

The word "bathroom" floated unexpectedly across the field.

He looked up again at the lorry in the distant comer. There was aman in a dark blue uniform explaining something to a man in roughworking clothes, who seemed a little disgruntled about whatever it was.The words "until we trace the owner" and "completely batty, of course"were gusted over on the wind. The man in the working clothes clearlyagreed to accept the situation, but with bad grace.

A few moments later, a horse was led out of the back of the lorryand into the field. The Monk blinked. His circuits thrilled and surgedwith astonishment. Now here at last was something he could believe in,a truly miraculous event, a reward at last for his unstinting if ratherpromiscuous devotion.

The horse walked with a patient, uncomplaining gait. It had longgrown used to being wherever it was put, but for once it felt it didn'tmind this. Here, it thought, was a pleasant field. Here was grass. Herewas a hedge it could look at. There was enough space that it could go for a trot later on if it felt the urge. The humans drove off and leftit to its own devices, to which it was quite content to be left. Itwent for a little amble, and then, just for the hell of it, stoppedambling. It could do what it liked.

What pleasure.

What very great and unaccustomed pleasure.

It slowly surveyed the whole field, and then decided to plan outa nice relaxed day for itself. A little trot later on, it thought,maybe around threeish. After that a bit of a lie down over on the eastside of the field where the grass was thicker. It looked like asuitable spot to think about supper in.

Lunch, it rather fancied, could be taken at the south end of thefield where a small stream ran. Lunch by a stream, for heaven's sake.This was bliss.

It also quite liked the notion of spending half an hour walkingalternately a little bit to the left and then a little bit to theright, for no apparent reason. It didn't know whether the time betweentwo and three would be best spent swishing its tail or mulling thingsover.

Of course, it could always do both, if it so wished, and go forits trot a little later. And it had just spotted what looked like afine piece of hedge for watching things over, and that would easilywhile away a pleasant pre-prandial hour or two.

Good.

An excellent plan.

And the best thing about it was that having made it the horsecould now completely and utterly ignore it. It went instead for aleisurely stand under the only tree in the field.

From out of its branches the Electric Monk dropped on to thehorse's back, with a cry which sounded suspiciously like "Geronimo".

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CHAPTER 18

Dirk Gently briefly ran over the salient facts once more whileRichard MacDuff's world crashed slowly and silently into a dark,freezing sea which he hadn't even known was there, waiting inchesbeneath his feet. When Dirk had finished for the second time the room fell quiet while Richard stared fixedly at his face.

"Where did you hear this?" said Richard at last.

"The radio," said Dirk, with a slight shrug, "at least the mainpoints. It's all over the news of course. The details? Well, discreetenquiries among contacts here and there. There are one or two people Igot to know at Cambridge police station, for reasons which may occur toyou."

"I don't even know whether to believe you," said Richard quietly."May I use the phone?"

Dirk courteously picked a telephone receiver out of thewastepaper bin and handed it to him. Richard dialled Susan's number.

The phone was answered almost immediately and a frightened voicesaid, "Hello?"

"Susan, it's Ri — "

"Richard! Where are you? For God's sake, where are you? Are youall right?"

"Don't tell her where you are," said Dirk.

"Susan, what's happened?"

"Don't you — ?"

"Somebody told me that something's happened to Gordon, but…"

"Something's happened — ? He's dead, Richard, he's been murdered– "

"Hang up," said Dirk.

"Susan, listen. I — "

"Hang up," repeated Dirk, and then leaned forward to the phoneand cut him off.

"The police will probably have a trace on the line," heexplained. He took the receiver and chucked it back in the bin.

"But I have to go to the police," Richard exclaimed.

"Go to the police?"

"What else can I do? I have to go to the police and tell themthat it wasn't me."

"Tell them that it wasn't you?" said Dirk incredulously. "Well Iexpect that will probably make it all right, then. Pity Dr Crippendidn't think of that. Would have saved him a lot of

bother."

"Yes, but he was guilty!"

"Yes, so it would appear. And so it would appear, at the moment,are you."

"But I didn't do it, for God's sake!"

"You are talking to someone who has spent time in prison forsomething he didn't do, remember. I told you that coincidences arestrange and dangerous things. Believe me, it is a great deal better tofind cast-iron proof that you're innocent, than to languish in a cellhoping that the police — who already think you're guilty — will findit for you."

"I can't think straight," said Richard, with his hand to hisforehead. "Just stop for a moment and let me think this out — "

"If I may — "

"Let me think — !"

Dirk shrugged and turned his attention back to his cigarette,which seemed to be bothering him.

"It's no good," said Richard shaking his head after a fewmoments, "I can't take it in. It's like trying to do trigonometry whensomeone's kicking your head. OK, tell me what you think I should do."

"Hypnotism."

"What?"

"It is hardly surprising in the circumstances that you should beunable to gather your thoughts clearly. However, it is vital thatsomebody gathers them. It will be much simpler for both of us if youwill allow me to hypnotise you. I strongly suspect that there is a verygreat deal of information jumbled up in your head that will not emergewhile you are shaking it up so — that might not emerge at all becauseyou do not realise its significance. With your permission we can short– cut all that."

"Well, that's decided then," said Richard, standing up, "I'mgoing to the police."

"Very well," said Dirk, leaning back and spreading his palms onthe desk, "I wish you the very best of luck. Perhaps on your way outyou would be kind enough to ask my secretary to get me some matches."

"You haven't got a secretary," said Richard, and left.

Dirk sat and brooded for a few seconds, made a valiant but vainattempt to fold the sadly empty pizza box into the wastepaper bin, andthen went to look in the cupboard for a metronome.

Richard emerged blinking into the daylight. He stood on the topstep rocking slightly, then plunged off down the street with an

odd kind of dancing walk which reflected the whirling dance of his mind. Onthe one hand he simply couldn't believe that the evidence wouldn't showperfectly clearly that he couldn't have committed the murder; on theother hand he had to admit that it all looked remarkably odd.

He found it impossible to think clearly or rationally about it.The idea that Gordon had been murdered kept blowing up in his mind andthrowing all other thoughts into total confusion and disruption.

It occurred to him for a moment that whoever did it must have been a damn fast shot to get the trigger pulled before being totallyoverwhelmed by waves of guilt, but instantly he regretted the thought.In fact he was a little appalled by the general quality of the thoughtsthat sprang into his mind. They seemed inappropriate and unworthy andmostly had to do with how it would affect his projects in the company.

He looked about inside himself for any feeling of great sorrow orregret, and assumed that it must be there somewhere, probably hidingbehind the huge wall of shock.

He arrived back within sight of Islington Green, hardly noticingthe distance he had walked. The sudden sight of the police squad carparked outside his house hit him like a hammer and he swung on his heeland stared with furious concentration at the menu displayed in thewindow of a Greek restaurant.

"Dolmades," he thought, frantically.

"Souvlaki," he thought.

"A small spicy Greek sausage," passed hectically through hismind. He tried to reconstruct the scene in his mind's eye withoutturning round. There had been a policeman standing watching the street,and as far as he could recall from the brief glance he had, it lookedas if the side door of the building which led up to his flat wasstanding open.

The police were in his flat. In his flat. Fassolia Plaki! Afilling bowl of haricot beans cooked in a tomato and vegetable sauce!

He tried to shift his eyes sideways and back over his shoulder.The policeman was looking at him. He yanked his eyes back to the menuand tried to fill his mind with finely ground meat mixed with potato,breadcrumbs, onions and herbs rolled into small balls and fried. Thepoliceman must have recognised him and was at that very moment dashingacross the road to grab him and lug him off in a Black Maria just asthey had done to Dirk all those years ago in Cambridge.

He braced his shoulders against the shock, but no hand came tograb him. He glanced back again, but the policeman was

lookingunconcernedly in another direction. Stifado.

It was very apparent to him that his behaviour was not that ofone who was about to go and hand himself in to the police.

So what else was he to do?

Trying in a stiff, awkward way to walk naturally, he yankedhimself away from the window, strolled tensely down the road a fewyards, and then ducked back down Camden Passage again, walking fast andbreathing hard. Where could he go? To Susan? No — the police would bethere or watching. To the WFT offices in Primrose Hill? No — samereason. What on earth, he screamed silently at himself, was he doingsuddenly as a fugitive?

He insisted to himself, as he had insisted to Dirk, that heshould not be running away from the police. The police, he toldhimself, as he had been taught when he was a boy, were there to helpand protect the innocent. This thought caused him instantly to breakinto a run and he nearly collided with the proud new owner of an uglyEdwardian floor lamp.

“Sorry,” he said, “sorry.” He was startled that anyone shouldwant such a thing, and slowed his pace to a walk, glancing with sharphunted looks around him. The very familiar shop fronts full of oldpolished brass, old polished wood and pictures of Japanese fishsuddenly seemed very threatening and aggressive.

Who could possibly have wanted to kill Gordon? This was thethought that suddenly hammered at him as he turned down Charlton Place.All that had concerned him so far was that he hadn’t.

But who had?

This was a new thought.

Plenty of people didn’t care for him much, but there is a hugedifference between disliking somebody — maybe even disliking them alot — and actually shooting them, strangling them, dragging themthrough the fields and setting their house on fire. It was a differencewhich kept the vast majority of the population alive from day to day.

Was it just theft? Dirk hadn’t mentioned anything being missingbut then he hadn’t asked him.

Dirk. The image of his absurd but oddly commanding figure sittinglike a large toad, brooding in his shabby office, kept insisting itselfupon Richard’s mind. He realised that he was retracing the way he hadcome, and deliberately made himself turn right instead of left.

That way madness lay.

He just needed a space, a bit of time to think and collect histhoughts together.

All right — so where was he going? He stopped for a moment,turned around and then stopped again. The idea of dolmades suddenlyseemed very attractive and it occurred to him that the cool, calm andcollected course of action would have been simply to walk in and havesome. That would have shown Fate who was boss.

Instead, Fate was engaged on exactly the same course of action.It wasn't actually sitting in a Greek restaurant eating dolmades, butit might as well have been, because it was clearly in charge. Richard'sfootsteps drew him inexorably back through the winding streets, overthe canal.

He stopped, briefly, at a corner shop, and then hurried on pastthe council estates, and into developer territory again until he wasstanding once more outside 33, Peckender Street. At about the same timeas Fate would have been pouring itself the last of the retsina, wipingits mouth and wondering if it had any room left for baklavas, Richardgazed up at the tall ruddy Victorian building with its soot-darkenedbrickwork and its heavy, forbidding windows. A gust of wind whippedalong the street and a small boy bounded up to him.

"Fuck off," chirped the little boy, then paused and looked at himagain.

"'Ere, mister," he added, "can I have your jacket?"

"No," said Richard.

"Why not?" said the boy.

"Er, because I like it," said Richard.

"Can't see why," muttered the boy. "Fuck off." He slouched offmoodily down the street, kicking a stone at a cat.

Richard entered the building once more, mounted the stairsuneasily and looked again into the office.

Dirk's secretary was sitting at her desk, head down, arms folded.

"I'm not here," she said.

"I see," said Richard.

"I only came back," she said, without looking up from the spot onher desk at which she was staring angrily, "to make sure he notices that I've gone. Otherwise he might just forget."

"Is he in?" asked Richard.

"Who knows? Who cares? Better ask someone who works for him,because I don't."

"Show him in!" boomed Dirk's voice.

She glowered for a moment, stood up, went to the inner door,wrenched it open, said "Show him in yourself," slammed the door oncemore and returned to her seat.

“Er, why don’t I just show myself in?” said Richard.

“I can’t even hear you,” said Dirk’s ex-secretary, staringresolutely at her desk. “How do you expect me to hear you if I’m noteven here?”

Richard made a placatory gesture, which was ignored, and walkedthrough and opened the door to Dirk’s office himself. He was startledto find the room in semi-darkness. A blind was drawn down over the window, and Dirk was lounging back in his seat, his face bizarrely litby the strange arrangement of objects sitting on the desk. At theforward edge of the desk sat an old grey bicycle lamp, facing backwardsand shining a feeble light on a metronome which was ticking softly backand forth, with a highly polished silver teaspoon strapped to its metalrod.

Richard tossed a couple of boxes of matches on to the desk.

“Sit down, relax, and keep looking at the spoon,” said Dirk, “youare already feeling sleepy…”

Another police car pulled itself up to a screeching halt outsideRichard’s flat, and a grim-faced man climbed out and strode over to oneof the constables on duty outside, flashing an identity card.

“Detective Inspector Mason, Cambridgeshire CID,” he said. “Thisthe MacDuff place?”

The constable nodded and showed him to the side-door entrance which opened on to the long narrow staircase leading up to the topflat. Mason bustled in and then bustled straight out again.

“There’s a sofa halfway up the stairs,” he told the constable.”Get it moved.”

“Some of the lads have already tried, sir,” the constable repliedanxiously. “It seems to be stuck. Everyone’s having to climb over itfor the moment, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Mason gave him another grim look from a vast repertoire he haddeveloped which ranged from very, very blackly grim indeed at thebottom of the scale, all the way up to tiredly resigned and onlyfaintly grim, which he reserved for his children’s birthdays.

“Get it moved,” he repeated grimly, and bustled grimly backthrough the door grimly hauling up his trousers and coat in preparationfor the grim ascent ahead.

“No sign of him yet?” asked the driver of the car, coming overhimself. “Sergeant Gilks,” he introduced himself. He looked tired.

“Not as far as I know,” said the constable, “but no one tells meanything.”

“Know how you feel,” agreed Gilks. “Once the CID gets

involvedyou just get relegated to driving them about. And I'm the only one whoknows what he looked like. Stopped him in the road last night. We justcame from Way's house. Right mess."

"Bad night, eh?"

"Varied. Everything from murder to hauling horses out ofbathrooms. No, don't even ask. Do you have the same cars as these?" headded, pointing at his own. "This one's been driving me crazy all the way up. Cold even with the heater on full blast, and the radio keepsturning itself on and off."

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CHAPTER 19

The same morning found Michael Wenton-Weakes in something of anodd mood.

You would need to know him fairly well to know that it was anespecially odd mood, because most people regarded him as being a littleodd to start with. Few people knew him that well. His mother, perhaps,but there existed between them a state of cold war and neither had spoken to the other now in weeks.

He also had an elder brother, Peter, who was now tremendouslysenior in the Marines. Apart from at their father's funeral, Michaelhad not seen Peter since he came back from the Falklands, covered inglory, promotion, and contempt for his younger brother.

Peter had been delighted that their mother had taken over Magna,and had sent Michael a regimental Christmas card to that effect. Hisown greatest satisfaction still remained that of throwing himself intoa muddy ditch and firing a machine gun for at least a minute, and hedidn't think that the British newspaper and publishing industry, evenin its current state of unrest, was likely to afford him that pleasure,at least until some more Australians moved into it.

Michael had risen very late after a night of cold savagery andthen of troubled dreams which still disturbed him now in the late morning daylight.

His dreams had been filled with the familiar sensations of loss,isolation, guilt and so forth, but had also been inexplicably involvedwith large quantities of mud. By the telescopic power of the night, thenightmare of mud and loneliness had seemed to stretch on forterrifying, unimaginable lengths of time, and had only concluded withthe appearance of slimy things with legs that had crawled on the slimysea. This had been altogether too much and he had woken with a start ina cold sweat.

Though all the business with the mud had seemed strange to him,the sense of loss, of isolation, and above all the aggrievement, theneed to undo what had been done, these had all found an easy home inhis spirit.

Even the slimy things with legs seemed oddly familiar and tickedaway irritably at the back of his mind while he made himself a latebreakfast, a piece of grapefruit and some China tea, allowed his eyesto rest lightly on the arts pages of the Daily Telegraph for a while,and then rather clumsily changed the dressing on the cuts on his hand.

These small tasks accomplished, he was then in two minds as towhat to do next.

He was able to view the events of the previous night with a cooldetachment that he would not have expected. It had been right, it hadbeen proper, it had been correctly done. But it resolved nothing. Allthat mattered was yet to be done.

All what? He frowned at the odd way his thoughts ebbed andflowed.

Normally he would pop along to his club at about this time. Itused to be that he would do this with a luxurious sense of the fact that there were many other things that he should be doing. Now therewas nothing else to do, which made time spent there, as anywhere else,hang somewhat heavy on his hands.

When he went he would do as he always did — indulge in a gin andtonic and a little light conversation, and then allow his eyes to restgently on the pages of the Times Literary Supplement, Opera, The NewYorker or whatever else fell easily to hand, but there was no doubtthat he did it these days with less verve and relish than previously.

Then there would be lunch. Today, he had no lunch date planned -?again — and would probably therefore have stayed at his club, andeaten a lightly grilled Dover sole, with potatoes garnished withparsley and boiled to bits, followed by a large heap of trifle. A glassor two of Sancerre. And coffee. And then the afternoon, with whateverthat might bring.

But today he felt oddly impelled not to do that. He flexed themuscles in his cut hand, poured himself another cup of tea, looked withcurious dispassion at the large kitchen knife that still lay by thefine bone china teapot, and waited for a moment to see what he would donext. What he did next, in fact, was to walk upstairs.

His house was rather chill in its formal perfection, and lookedmuch as people who buy reproduction furniture would like their housesto look. Except of course that everything here was genuine — crystal,mahogany and Wilton — and only looked as if it might be fake becausethere was no life to any of it.

He walked up into his workroom, which was the only room in thehouse that was not sterile with order, but here the disorder of booksand papers was instead sterile with neglect. A thin film of dust hadsettled over everything. Michael had not been into it in weeks, and thecleaner was under strict instructions to leave it well alone. He had not worked here since he edited the last edition of Fathom. Not, ofcourse, the actual last edition, but the last proper edition. The lastedition as far as he was concerned.

He set his china cup down in the fine dust and went to inspecthis elderly record player. On it he found an elderly recording of someVivaldi wind concertos, set it to play and sat down.

He waited again to see what he would do next and suddenly foundto his surprise that he was already doing it, and it was this: he waslistening to the music.

A bewildered look crept slowly across his face as he realisedthat he had never done this before. He had heard it many, many timesand thought that it made a very pleasant noise. Indeed, he found thatit made a pleasant background against which to discuss the concertseason, but it had never before occurred to him that there was anythingactually to listen to.

He sat thunderstruck by the interplay of melody and counterpointwhich suddenly stood revealed to him with a clarity that owed nothingto the dust-ridden surface of the record or the fourteen-year-oldstylus.

But with this revelation came an almost immediate sense of disappointment, which confused him all the more. The music suddenlyrevealed to him was oddly unfulfilling. It was as if his capacity tounderstand the music had suddenly increased up to and far beyond themusic's ability to satisfy it, all in one dramatic moment.

He strained to listen for what was missing, and felt that themusic was like a flightless bird that didn't even know what capacity ithad lost. It walked very well, but it walked where it should soar, itwalked where it should swoop, it walked where it should climb and bankand dive, it walked where it should thrill with the giddiness offlight. It never even looked up.

He looked up.

After a while he became aware that all he was doing was simplystaring stupidly at the ceiling. He shook his head, and discovered thatthe perception had faded, leaving him feeling slightly sick and dizzy.It had not vanished entirely, but had dropped deep inside him, deeperthan he could reach.

The music continued. It was an agreeable enough assortment ofpleasant sounds in the background, but it no longer stirred him.

He needed some clues as to what it was he had just experienced,and a thought flicked momentarily at the back of his mind as to wherehe might find them. He let go of the thought in anger, but it flickedat him again, and kept on flicking at him until at last he acted uponit.

From under his desk he pulled out the large tin wastepaper bin.Since he had barred his cleaning lady from even coming in

here for themoment, the bin had remained unemptied and he found in it the tatteredshreds of what he was looking for with the contents of an ashtrayemptied over them.

He overcame his distaste with grim determination and slowlyjiggled around the bits of the hated object on his desk, clumsilysticking them together with bits of sticky tape that curled around andstuck the wrong bit to the wrong bit and stuck the right bit to hispudgy fingers and then to the desk, until at last there lay before him,crudely reassembled, a copy of Fathom. As edited by the execrablecreature A. K. Ross.

Appalling.

He turned the sticky lumpish pages as if he was picking overchicken giblets. Not a single line drawing of Joan Sutherland orMarilyn Horne anywhere. No profiles of any of the major Cork Street artdealers, not a one.

His series on the Rossettis: discontinued. “Green Room Gossip’: discontinued.He shook his head in incredulity and then he found the article he

was after. “Music and Fractal Landscapes’ by Richard MacDuff.He skipped over the first couple of paragraphs of introduction

and picked it up further on:

Mathematical analysis and computer modelling are revealingto us that the shapes and processes we encounter in nature -?the way that plants grow, the way that mountains erode orrivers flow, the way that snowflakes or islands achieve theirshapes, the way that light plays on a surface, the way themilk folds and spins into your coffee as you stir it, the waythat laughter sweeps through a crowd of people — all thesethings in their seemingly magical complexity can be describedby the interaction of mathematical processes that are, ifanything, even more magical in their simplicity.Shapes that we think of as random are in fact the productsof complex shifting webs of numbers obeying simple rules. Thevery word “natural” that we have often taken to mean”unstructured” in fact describes shapes and processes thatappear so unfathomably complex that we cannot consciouslyperceive the simple natural laws at work.They can all be described by numbers.

Oddly, this idea seemed less revolting now to Michael than it haddone on his first, scant reading.

He read on with increasing concentration.

We know, however, that the mind is capable of understandingthese matters in all their complexity and in all theirsimplicity. A ball flying through the air is responding to

theforce and direction with which it was thrown, the action ofgravity, the friction of the air which it must expend itsenergy on overcoming, the turbulence of the air around itssurface, and the rate and direction of the ball's spin.And yet, someone who might have difficulty consciouslytrying to work out what 3 x 4 x 5 comes to would have notrouble in doing differential calculus and a whole host ofrelated calculations so astoundingly fast that they canactually catch a flying ball.People who call this "instinct" are merely giving thephenomenon a name, not explaining anything.I think that the closest that human beings come toexpressing our understanding of these natural complexities isin music. It is the most abstract of the arts — it has no meaning or purpose other than to be itself.Every single aspect of a piece of music can be representedby numbers. From the organisation of movements in a wholesymphony, down through the patterns of pitch and rhythm thatmake up the melodies and harmonies, the dynamics that shapethe performance, all the way down to the timbres of the notesthemselves, their harmonics, the way they change over time, inshort, all the elements of a noise that distinguish betweenthe sound of one person piping on a piccolo and another onethumping a drum — all of these things can be expressed bypatterns and hierarchies of numbers.And in my experience the more internal relationships thereare between the patterns of numbers at different levels of thehierarchy, however complex and subtle those relationships maybe, the more satisfying and, well, whole, the music will seemto be. In fact the more subtle and complex those relationships,and the further they are beyond the grasp of the consciousmind, the more the instinctive part of your mind — by which Imean that part of your mind that can do differential calculusso astoundingly fast that it will put your hand in the rightplace to catch a flying ball — the more that part of yourbrain revels in it. Music of any complexity (and even "Three Blind Mice" iscomplex in its way by the time someone has actually performedit on an instrument with its own individual timbre and articulation) passes beyond your conscious mind into the armsof your own private mathematical genius who dwells in yourunconscious responding to all the inner complexities andrelationships and proportions that we think we know nothingabout. Some people object to such a view of music, saying that ifyou reduce music to mathematics, where does the emotion comeinto it? I would say that it's never been out of it.The things by which our emotions can be moved — the shapeof a flower or a Grecian urn, the way a baby grows, the waythe wind brushes across your face, the way clouds move, their shapes, the way light

dances on the water, or daffodilsflutter in the breeze, the way in which the person you lovemoves their head, the way their hair follows that movement,the curve described by the dying fall of the last chord of apiece of music — all these things can be described by thecomplex flow of numbers.That's not a reduction of it, that's the beauty of it.Ask Newton. Ask Einstein. Ask the poet (Keats) who said that what the imaginationseizes as beauty must be truth.He might also have said that what the hand seizes as a ballmust be truth, but he didn't, because he was a poet andpreferred loafing about under trees with a bottle of laudanumand a notebook to playing cricket, but it would have beenequally true.

This jogged a thought at the back of Michael's memory, but hecouldn't immediately place it.

Because that is at the heart of the relationship between onthe one hand our "instinctive" understanding of shape, form,movement, light, and on the other hand our emotional responsesto them. And that is why I believe that there must be a form ofmusic inherent in nature, in natural objects, in the patternsof natural processes. A music that would be as deeplysatisfying as any naturally occurring beauty — and our owndeepest emotions are, after all, a form of naturally occurringbeauty…

Michael stopped reading and let his gaze gradually drift from thepage.

He wondered if he knew what such a music would be and tried to grope in the dark recesses of his mind for it. Each part of his mindthat he visited seemed as if that music had been playing there onlyseconds before and all that was left was the last dying echo ofsomething he was unable to catch at and hear. He laid the magazinelimply aside.

Then he remembered what it was that the mention of Keats had

jogged in his memory.The slimy things with legs from his dream.A cold calm came over him as he felt himself coming very close to

something.Coleridge. That man.

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legsUpon the slimy sea.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Dazed, Michael walked over to the bookshelf and pulled down hisColeridge anthology. He took it back to his seat and with a certainapprehension he riffled through the pages until he found the openinglines.

It is an ancient Mariner,And he stoppeth one of three.

The words were very familiar to him, and yet as he read onthrough them they awoke in him strange sensations and fearful memoriesthat he knew were not his. There reared up inside him a sense of lossand desolation of terrifying intensity which, while he knew it was nothis own, resonated so perfectly now with his own aggrievements that hecould not but surrender to it absolutely.

And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.

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CHAPTER 20

The blind rolled up with a sharp rattle and Richard blinked.

“A fascinating evening you appear to have spent,” said DirkGently, “even though the most interesting aspects of it seem to haveescaped your curiosity entirely.”

He returned to his seat and lounged back in it pressing hisfingertips together.

“Please,” he said, “do not disappoint me by saying “where am I?”A glance will suffice.”

Richard looked around him in slow puzzlement and felt as if hewere returning unexpectedly from a long sojourn on another planet whereall was peace and light and music that went on for ever and ever. Hefelt so relaxed he could hardly be bothered to breathe.

The wooden toggle on the end of the blind cord knocked a fewtimes against the window, but otherwise all was now silent. Themetronome was still. He glanced at his watch. It was just after oneo’clock.

“You have been under hypnosis for a little less than an hour,”said Dirk, “during which I have learned many interesting things andbeen puzzled by some others which I would now like to discuss with you.A little fresh air will probably help revive you and I suggest abracing stroll along the canal. No one will be looking for you there.Janice!”

Silence.

A lot of things were still not clear to Richard, and he frownedto himself. When his immediate memory returned a moment later, it waslike an elephant suddenly barging through the door and he sat up with astartled jolt.

“Janice!” shouted Dirk again. “Miss Pearce! Damn the girl.”

He yanked the telephone receivers out of the wastepaper basketand replaced them. An old and battered leather briefcase stood by thedesk, and he picked this up, retrieved his hat from the floor and stoodup, screwing his hat absurdly on his head.

“Come,” he said, sweeping through the door to where Miss JanicePearce sat glaring at a pencil, “let us go. Let us leave this festeringhellhole. Let us think the unthinkable, let us do the undoable. Let usprepare to grapple with the ineffable itself, and see if we may not effit after all. Now, Janice — “

“Shut up.”

Dirk shrugged, and then picked off her desk the book whichearlier she had mutilated when trying to slam her drawer.

He leafedthrough it, frowning, and then replaced it with a sigh. Janice returnedto what she had clearly been doing a moment or two earlier, which waswriting a long note with the pencil.

Richard regarded all this in silence, still feeling only semi -? present. He shook his head.

Dirk said to him, “Events may seem to you to be a tangled mass ofconfusion at the moment. And yet we have some interesting threads topull on. For of all the things you have told me that have happened,only two are actually physically impossible.”

Richard spoke at last. “Impossible?” he said with a frown.

“Yes,” said Dirk, “completely and utterly impossible.”

He smiled.

“Luckily,” he went on, “you have come to exactly the right placewith your interesting problem, for there is no such word as”impossible” in my dictionary. In fact,” he added, brandishing theabused book, “everything between “herring” and “marmalade” appears tobe missing. Thank you, Miss Pearce, you have once again rendered mesterling service, for which I thank you and will, in the event of asuccessful outcome to this endeavour, even attempt to pay you. In themeantime we have much to think on, and I leave the office in your verycapable hands.”

The phone rang and Janice answered it.

“Good afternoon,” she said, “Wainwright’s Fruit Emporium. MrWainwright is not able to take calls at this time since he is not rightin the head and thinks he is a cucumber. Thank you for calling.”

She slammed the phone down. She looked up again to see the doorclosing softly behind her ex-employer and his befuddled client.

“Impossible?” said Richard again, in surprise.

“Everything about it,” insisted Dirk, “completely and utterly -? well, let us say inexplicable. There is no point in using the word”impossible” to describe something that has clearly happened. But itcannot be explained by anything we know.”

The briskness of the air along the Grand Union Canal got in amongRichard’s senses and sharpened them up again. He was restored to hisnormal faculties, and though the fact of Gordon’s death kept jumping athim all over again every few seconds, he was at least now able to thinkmore clearly about it. Oddly enough, though, that seemed for the momentto be the last thing on Dirk’s mind. Dirk was instead picking on themost trivial of the night’s sequence of bizarre incidents on which tocross-examine him.

A jogger going one way and a cyclist going the other both shoutedat each other to get out of the way, and narrowly avoided hurling eachother into the murky, slow-moving waters of the canal. They werewatched carefully by a very slow-moving old lady who was dragging aneven slower-moving old dog.

On the other bank large empty warehouses stood startled, everywindow shattered and glinting. A burned-out barge lolled brokenly inthe water. Within it a couple of detergent bottles floated on thebrackish water. Over the nearest bridge heavy-goods lorries thundered,shaking the foundations of the houses, belching petrol fumes into theair and frightening a mother trying to cross the road with her pram.

Dirk and Richard were walking along from the fringes of SouthHackney, a mile from Dirk's office, back towards the heart ofIslington, where Dirk knew the nearest lifebelts were positioned.

"But it was only a conjuring trick, for heaven's sake," saidRichard. "He does them all the time. It's just sleight of hand. Looksimpossible but I'm sure if you asked any conjurer he'd say it's easyonce you know how these things are done. I once saw a man on the streetin New York doing — "

"I know how these things are done," said Dirk, pulling twolighted cigarettes and a large glazed fig out of his nose. He tossedthe fig up in to the air, but it somehow failed to land anywhere."Dexterity, misdirection, suggestion. All things you can learn if youhave a little time to waste. Excuse me, dear lady," he said to theelderly, slow — moving dog-owner as they passed her. He bent down tothe dog and pulled a long string of brightly coloured flags from itsbottom. "I think he will move more comfortably now," he said, tippedhis hat courteously to her and moved on.

"These things, you see," he said to a flummoxed Richard, "areeasy. Sawing a lady in half is easy. Sawing a lady in half and thenjoining her up together again is less easy, but can be done withpractice. The trick you described to me with the two-hundred-year-oldvase and the college salt cellar is — " he paused for emphasis -?"completely and utterly inexplicable."

"Well there was probably some detail of it I missed, but…"

"Oh, without question. But the benefit of questioning somebodyunder hypnosis is that it allows the questioner to see the scene inmuch greater detail than the subject was even aware of at the time. Thegirl Sarah, for instance. Do you recall what she was wearing?"

"Er, no," said Richard, vaguely, "a dress of some kind, I

suppose– “

“Colour? Fabric?”

“Well, I can’t remember, it was dark. She was sitting severalplaces away from me. I hardly glimpsed her.”

“She was wearing a dark blue cotton velvet dress gathered to adropped waist. It had raglan sleeves gathered to the cuffs, a whitePeter Pan collar and six small pearl buttons down the front — thethird one down had a small thread hanging off it. She had long darkhair pulled back with a red butterfly hairgrip.”

“If you’re going to tell me you know all that from looking at ascuff mark on my shoes, like Sherlock Holmes, then I’m afraid I don’tbelieve you.”

“No, no,” said Dirk, “it’s much simpler than that. You told meyourself under hypnosis.”

Richard shook his head.

“Not true,” he said, “I don’t even know what a Peter Pan collaris.”

“But I do and you described it to me perfectly accurately. As youdid the conjuring trick. And that trick was not possible in the form inwhich it occurred. Believe me. I know whereof I speak. There are someother things I would like to discover about the Professor, like forinstance who wrote the note you discovered on the table and how manyquestions George III actually asked, but — “

“What?”

” — but I think I would do better to question the fellowdirectly. Except…” He frowned deeply in concentration. “Except,” headded, “that being rather vain in these matters I would prefer to knowthe answers before I asked the questions. And I do not. I absolutely donot.” He gazed abstractedly into the distance, and made a roughcalculation of the remaining distance to the nearest lifebelt.

“And the second impossible thing,” he added, just as Richard wasabout to get a word in edgeways, “or at least, the next completelyinexplicable thing, is of course the matter of your sofa.”

“Dirk,” exclaimed Richard in exasperation, “may I remind you thatGordon Way is dead, and that I appear to be under suspicion of hismurder! None of these things have the remotest connection with that,

and I — ” “But I am extremely inclined to believe that they are connected.”"That’s absurd!” “I believe in the fundamental inter — “

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” said Richard, “the

fundamentalinterconnectedness of all things. Listen, Dirk, I am not a gullible oldlady and you won't be getting any trips to Bermuda out of me. If you'regoing to help me then let's stick to the point."

Dirk bridled at this. "I believe that all things arefundamentally interconnected, as anyone who follows the principles ofquantum mechanics to their logical extremes cannot, if they are honest,help but accept. But I also believe that some things are a great dealmore interconnected than others. And when two apparently impossibleevents and a sequence of highly peculiar ones all occur to the sameperson, and when that person suddenly becomes the suspect of a highlypeculiar murder, then it seems to me that we should look for thesolution in the connection between these events. You are the connection, and you yourself have been behaving in a highly peculiarand eccentric way."

"I have not," said Richard. "Yes, some odd things have happenedto me, but I — "

"You were last night observed, by me, to climb the outside of abuilding and break into the flat of your girlfriend, Susan Way."

"It may have been unusual," said Richard, "it may not even havebeen wise. But it was perfectly logical and rational. I just wanted toundo something I had done before it caused any damage."

Dirk thought for a moment, and slightly quickened his pace.

"And what you did was a perfectly reasonable and normal responseto the problem of the message you had left on the tape — yes, you toldme all about that in our little session — it's what anyone would havedone?"

Richard frowned as if to say that he couldn't see what all thefuss was about. "I don't say anyone would have done it," he said, "Iprobably have a slightly more logical and literal turn of mind thanmany people, which is why I can write computer software. It was alogical and literal solution to the problem."

"Not a little disproportionate, perhaps?"

"It was very important to me not to disappoint Susan yet again."

"So you are absolutely satisfied with your own reasons for doingwhat you did?"

"Yes," insisted Richard angrily.

"Do you know," said Dirk, "what my old maiden aunt who lived inWinnipeg used to tell me?"

"No," said Richard. He quickly took off all his clothes and divedinto the canal. Dirk leapt for the lifebelt, with which they had justdrawn level, yanked it out of its holder and flung it to

Richard, whowas floundering in the middle of the canal looking completely lost anddisoriented.

"Grab hold of this," shouted Dirk, "and I'll haul you in."

"It's all right," spluttered Richard, "I can swim — "

"No, you can't," yelled Dirk, "now grab it."

Richard tried to strike out for the bank, but quickly gave up inconsternation and grabbed hold of the lifebelt. Dirk pulled on the ropetill Richard reached the edge, and then bent down to give him a handout. Richard came up out of the water puffing and spitting, then turnedand sat shivering on the edge with his hands in his lap.

"God, it's foul in there!" he exclaimed and spat again. "It's absolutely disgusting. Yeuchh. Whew. God. I'm usually a pretty goodswimmer. Must have got some kind of cramp. Lucky coincidence we were soclose to the lifebelt. Oh thanks." This last he said in response to thelarge towel which Dirk handed him.

He rubbed himself down briskly, almost scraping himself with thetowel to get the filthy canal water off him. He stood up and lookedabout. "Can you find my pants?"

"Young man," said the old lady with the dog, who had just reachedthem. She stood looking at them sternly, and was about to rebuke themwhen Dirk interrupted.

"A thousand apologies, dear lady," he said, "for any offence myfriend may inadvertently have caused you. Please," he added, drawing aslim bunch of anemones from Richard's bottom, "accept these with mycompliments."

The lady dashed them out of Dirk's hand with her stick, andhurried off, horror-struck, yanking her dog after her.

"That wasn't very nice of you," said Richard, pulling on hisclothes underneath the towel that was now draped strategically aroundhim.

"I don't think she's a very nice woman," replied Dirk, "she'salways down here, yanking her poor dog around and telling people off.Enjoy your swim?"

"Not much, no," said Richard, giving his hair a quick rub. "Ihadn't realised how filthy it would be in there. And cold. Here," hesaid, handing the towel back to Dirk, "thanks. Do you always carry atowel around in your briefcase?"

"Do you always go swimming in the afternoons?"

"No, I usually go in the mornings, to the swimming pool onHighbury Fields, just to wake myself up, get the brain going. It justoccurred to me I hadn't been this morning."

"And, er — that was why you just dived into the canal?"

"Well, yes. I just thought that getting a bit of exercise

wouldprobably help me deal with all this."

"Not a little disproportionate, then, to strip off and jump intothe canal."

"No," he said, "it may not have been wise given the state of thewater, but it was perfectly — "

"You were perfectly satisfied with your own reasons for doingwhat you did."

"Yes — "

"And it was nothing to do with my aunt, then?"

Richard's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What on earth are youtalking about?" he said.

"I'll tell you," said Dirk. He went and sat on a nearby bench andopened his case again. He folded the towel away into it and took outinstead a small Sony tape recorder. He beckoned Richard over and thenpushed the Play button. Dirk's own voice floated from the tiny speakerin a lilting sing-song voice. It said, "In a minute I will click myfingers and you will wake and forget all of this except for theinstructions I shall now give you.

"In a little while we will go for a walk along the canal, andwhen you hear me say the words "my old maiden aunt who lived inWinnipeg" — "

Dirk suddenly grabbed Richard's arm to restrain him.

The tape continued, "You will take off all your clothes and diveinto the canal. You will find that you are unable to swim, but you willnot panic or sink, you will simply tread water until I throw you the lifebelt…"

Dirk stopped the tape and looked round at Richard's face whichfor the second time that day was pale with shock.

"I would be interested to know exactly what it was that possessedyou to climb into Miss Way's flat last night," said Dirk, "and why."

Richard didn't respond — he was continuing to stare at the taperecorder in some confusion. Then he said in a shaking voice, "There wasa message from Gordon on Susan's tape. He phoned from the car. Thetape's in my flat. Dirk, I'm suddenly very frightened by all this."

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CHAPTER 21

Dirk watched the police officer on duty outside Richard's housefrom behind a van parked a few yards away. He had been stopping andquestioning everyone who tried to enter the small side alley down whichRichard's door was situated, including, Dirk was pleased to note, otherpolicemen if he didn't immediately recognise them. Another police carpulled up and Dirk started to move.

A police officer climbed out of the car carrying a saw and walkedtowards the doorway. Dirk briskly matched his pace with him, a step ortwo behind, striding authoritatively.

"It's all right, he's with me," said Dirk, sweeping past at theexact moment that the one police officer stopped the other.

And he was inside and climbing the stairs.

The officer with the saw followed him in.

"Er, excuse me, sir," he called up after Dirk.

Dirk had just reached the point where the sofa obstructed thestairway. He stopped and twisted round.

"Stay here," he said, "guard this sofa. Do not let anyone touchit, and I mean anyone. Understood?"

The officer seemed flummoxed for a moment.

"I've had orders to saw it up," he said.

"Countermanded," barked Dirk. "Watch it like a hawk. I shall wanta full report."

He turned back and climbed up over the thing. A moment or twolater he emerged into a large open area. This was the lower of the twofloors that comprised Richard's flat.

"Have you searched that?" snapped Dirk at another officer who wassitting at Richard's dining table looking through some notes. Theofficer looked up in surprise and started to stand up. Dirk waspointing at the wastepaper basket.

"Er, yes — "

"Search it again. Keep searching it. Who's here?"

"Er, well — "

"I haven't got all day."

"Detective Inspector Mason just left, with — "

"Good, I'm having him pulled off. I'll be upstairs if I'm needed,but I don't want any interruptions unless it's very important.Understood?"

"Er, who — "

"I don't see you searching the wastepaper basket."

"Er, right, sir. I'll — "

“I want it deep-searched. You understand?”

“Er — “

“Get cracking.” Dirk swept on upstairs and into Richard’sworkroom.

The tape was lying exactly where Richard had told him it wouldbe, on the long desk on which the six Macintoshes sat. Dirk was aboutto pocket it when his curiosity was caught by the image of Richard’ssofa slowly twisting and turning on the big Macintosh screen, and hesat down at the keyboard.

He explored the program Richard had written for a short while,but quickly realised that in its present form it was less than self -?explanatory and he learned little. He managed at last to get the sofaunstuck and move it back down the stairs, but he realised that he hadhad to turn part of the wall off in order to do it. With a grunt ofirritation he gave up.

Another computer he looked at was displaying a steady sine wave.Around the edges of the screen were the small images of other waveformswhich could be selected and added to the main one or used to modify itin other ways. He quickly discovered that this enabled you to build upvery complex waveforms from simple ones and he played with this for awhile. He added a simple sine wave to itself, which had the effect ofdoubling the height of the peaks and troughs of the wave. Then he slidone of the waves half a step back with respect to the other, and thepeaks and troughs of one simply cancelled out the peaks and troughs ofthe other, leaving a completely flat line. Then he changed thefrequency of one of the sine waves by a small extent.

The result of this was that at some positions along the combinedwaveform the two waves reinforced each other, and at others theycancelled each other out. Adding a third simple wave of yet anotherfrequency resulted in a combined wave in which it was hard to see anypattern at all. The line danced up and down seemingly at random,staying quite low for some periods and then suddenly building into verylarge peaks and troughs as all three waves came briefly into phase witheach other.

Dirk assumed that there must be amongst this array of equipment ameans for translating the waveform dancing on the Macintosh screen intoan actual musical tone and hunted among the menus available in theprogram. He found one menu item which invited him to transfer the wavesample into an Emu.

This puzzled him. He glanced around the room in search of a largeflightless bird, but was unable to locate any such thing. He activatedthe process anyway, and then traced the cable which led from the backof the Macintosh, down behind the desk, along the

floor, behind acupboard, under a rug until it fetched up plugged into the back of alarge grey keyboard called an Emulator II.

This, he assumed, was where his experimental waveform has justarrived. Tentatively he pushed a key.

The nasty farting noise that surged instantly out of the speakerswas so loud that for a moment he didn't hear the words "Svlad Cjelli!"that were barked simultaneously from the doorway.

Richard sat in Dirk's office and threw tiny screwed-up balls ofpaper at the wastepaper bin which was already full of telephones. Hebroke pencils. He played major extracts from an old Ginger Baker soloon his knees.

In a word, he fretted.

He had been trying to write down on a piece of Dirk's notepaperall that he could remember of the events of the previous evening and,as far as he could pinpoint them, the times at which each had occurred.He was astonished at how difficult it was, and how feeble his consciousmemory seemed to be in comparison with his unconscious memory, as Dirk had demonstrated it to him.

"Damn Dirk," he thought. He wanted to talk to Susan.

Dirk had told him he must not do so on any account as there wouldbe a trace on the phone lines.

"Damn Dirk," he said suddenly, and sprang to his feet.

"Have you got any ten-pence pieces?" he said to the resolutelyglum Janice.

Dirk turned.

Framed in the doorway stood a tall dark figure.

The tall dark figure appeared to be not at all happy with what itsaw, to be rather cross about it, in fact. To be more than cross. Itappeared to be a tall dark figure who could very easily yank the headsoff half a dozen chickens and still be cross at the end of it.

It stepped forward into the light and revealed itself to beSergeant Gilks of the Cambridgeshire Constabulary.

"Do you know," said Sergeant Gilks of the CambridgeshireConstabulary, blinking with suppressed emotion, "that when I arriveback here to discover one police officer guarding a sofa with a saw andanother dismembering an innocent wastepaper basket I have to ask myselfcertain questions? And I have to ask them with the disquieting sensethat I am not going to like the answers when I find them.

"I then find myself mounting the stairs with a horriblepremonition, Svlad Cjelli, a very horrible premonition indeed. Apremonition, I might add, that I now find horribly justified. I supposeyou can't shed any light on a horse discovered

in a bathroom as well?That seemed to have an air of you about it."

"I cannot," said Dirk, "as yet. Though it interests mestrangely."

"I should think it bloody did. It would have interested youstrangely if you'd had to get the bloody thing down a bloody windingstaircase at one o'clock in the morning as well. What the hell are youdoing here?" said Sergeant Gilks, wearily.

"I am here," said Dirk, "in pursuit of justice."

"Well, I wouldn't mix with me then," said Gilks, "and I certainlywouldn't mix with the Met. What do you know of MacDuff and Way?"

"Of Way? Nothing beyond what is common knowledge. MacDuff I knewat Cambridge."

"Oh, you did, did you? Describe him."

"Tall. Tall and absurdly thin. And good-natured. A bit like apreying mantis that doesn't prey — a non-preying mantis if you like. Asort of pleasant genial mantis that's given up preying and taken uptennis instead."

"Hmm," said Gilks gruffly, turning away and looking about theroom. Dirk pocketed the tape.

"Sounds like the same one," said Gilks.

"And of course," said Dirk, "completely incapable of murder."

"That's for us to decide."

"And of course a jury."

"Tchah! Juries!"

"Though, of course, it will not come to that, since the factswill speak for themselves long before it comes to a court of law for myclient."

"Your bleeding client, eh? All right, Cjelli, where is he?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"I'll bet you've got a billing address."

Dirk shrugged.

"Look, Cjelli, this is a perfectly normal, harmless murderenquiry, and I don't want you mucking it up. So consider yourselfwarned off as of now. If I see a single piece of evidence beinglevitated I'll hit you so hard you won't know if it's tomorrow orThursday. Now get out, and give me that tape on the way." He held outhis hand.

Dirk blinked, genuinely surprised. "What tape?"

Gilks sighed. "You're a clever man, Cjelli, I grant you that," hesaid, "but you make the same mistake a lot of clever people do ofthinking everyone else is stupid. If I turn away it's for a reason, andthe reason was to see what you picked up. I didn't need to see

you pickit up, I just had to see what was missing afterwards. We are trainedyou know. We used to get half an hour Observation Training on Tuesdayafternoons. Just as a break after four hours solid of Senseless Brutality."

Dirk hid his anger with himself behind a light smile. He fishedin the pocket of his leather overcoat and handed over the tape.

"Play it," said Gilks, "let's see what you didn't want us tohear."

"It wasn't that I didn't want you to hear it," said Dirk, with ashrug. "I just wanted to hear it first." He went over to the shelfwhich carried Richard's hi-fi equipment and slipped the tape into thecassette player.

"So do you want to give me a little introduction?"

"It's a tape," said Dirk, "from Susan Way's telephone answeringmachine. Way apparently had this habit of leaving long…"

"Yeah, I know about that. And his secretary goes round picking uphis prattlings in the morning, poor devil."

"Well, I believe there may be a message on the tape from GordonWay's car last night."

"I see. OK. Play it."

With a gracious bow Dirk pressed the Play button.

"Oh, Susan, hi, it's Gordon," said the tape once again. "Just onmy way to the cottage — "

"Cottage!" exclaimed Gilks, satirically.

"It's, er, Thursday night, and it's, er…8.47. Bit misty on theroads. Listen, I have those people from the States coming over thisweekend…"

Gilks raised his eyebrows, looked at his watch, and made a noteon his pad.

Both Dirk and the police sergeant experienced a chill as the deadman's voice filled the room.

" — it's a wonder I don't end up dead in the ditch, that wouldbe something wouldn't it, leaving your famous last words on somebody'sanswering machine, there's no reason — "

They listened in a tense silence as the tape played on throughthe entire message.

"That's the problem with crunch-heads — they have one great ideathat actually works and then they expect you to carry on funding themfor years while they sit and calculate the topographies of theirnavels. I'm sorry, I'm going to have to stop and close the bootproperly. Won't be a moment."

Next came the muffled bump of the telephone receiver

beingdropped on the passenger seat, and a few seconds later the sound of thecar door being opened. In the meantime, the music from the car's soundsystem could be heard burbling away in the background.

A few seconds later still came the distant, muffled, but unmistakable double blam of a shotgun.

"Stop the tape," said Gilks sharply and glanced at his watch."Three minutes and twenty-five seconds since he said it was 8.47." Heglanced up at Dirk again. "Stay here. Don't move. Don't touch anything.I've made a note of the position of every particle of air in this room,so I shall know if you've been breathing."

He turned smartly and left. Dirk heard him saying as he went downthe stairs, "Tuckett, get on to WayForward's office, get the details ofWay's carphone, what number, which network…" The voice faded awaydownstairs.

Quickly Dirk twisted down the volume control on the hi-fi, andresumed playing the tape.

The music continued for a while. Dirk drummed his fingers infrustration. Still the music continued.

He flicked the Fast Forward button for just a moment. Stillmusic. It occurred to him that he was looking for something, but thathe didn't know what. That thought stopped him in his tracks.

He was very definitely looking for something.

He very definitely didn't know what.

The realisation that he didn't know exactly why he was doing whathe was doing suddenly chilled and electrified him. He turned slowlylike a fridge door opening.

There was no one there, at least no one that he could see. But heknew the chill prickling through his skin and detested it above allthings.

He said in a low savage whisper, "If anyone can hear me, hearthis. My mind is my centre and everything that happens there is myresponsibility. Other people may believe what it pleases them tobelieve, but I will do nothing without I know the reason why and knowit clearly. If you want something then let me know, but do not you daretouch my mind."

He was trembling with a deep and old rage. The chill droppedslowly and almost pathetically from him and seemed to move off into theroom. He tried to follow it with his senses, but was instantlydistracted by a sudden voice that seemed to come at him on the edge ofhis hearing, on a distant howl of wind.

It was a hollow, terrified, bewildered voice, no more than

aninsubstantial whisper, but it was there, audible, on the telephone -?answering machine tape.

It said, “Susan! Susan, help me! Help me for God’s sake. Susan,I’m dead — “

Dirk whirled round and stopped the tape.

“I’m sorry,” he said under his breath, “but I have the welfare ofmy client to consider.”

He wound the tape back a very short distance, to just beforewhere the voice began, twisted the Record Level knob to zero andpressed Record. He left the tape to run, wiping off the voice andanything that might follow it. If the tape was going to establish thetime of Gordon Way’s death, then Dirk didn’t want any embarrassingexamples of Gordon speaking to turn up on the tape after that point,even if it was only to confirm that he was, in fact, dead.

There seemed to be a great eruption of emotion in the air near tohim. A wave of something surged through the room, causing the furnitureto flutter in its wake. Dirk watched where it seemed to go, towards ashelf near the door on which, he suddenly realised, stood Richard’s owntelephone-answering machine. The machine started to jiggle fitfullywhere it sat, but then sat still as Dirk approached it. Dirk reached out slowly and calmly and pushed the button which set the machine toAnswer.

The disturbance in the air then passed back through the room toRichard’s long desk where two old-fashioned rotary-dial telephonesnestled among the piles of paper and micro floppy disks. Dirk guessedwhat would happen, but elected to watch rather than to intervene.

One of the telephone receivers toppled off its cradle. Dirk couldhear the dialling tone. Then, slowly and with obvious difficulty, thedial began to turn. It moved unevenly round, further round, slower andslower, and then suddenly slipped back.

There was a moment’s pause. Then the receiver rests went down andup again to get a new dialling tone. The dial began to turn again, butcreaking even more fitfully than the last time.

Again it slipped back.

There was a longer pause this time, and then the entire processwas repeated once more.

When the dial slipped back a third time there was a suddenexplosion of fury — the whole phone leapt into the air and hurtledacross the room. The receiver cord wrapped itself round an Anglepoiselamp on the way and brought it crashing down in a tangle of cables,coffee cups and floppy disks. A pile of books erupted off the desk andon to the floor.

The figure of Sergeant Gilks stood stony-faced in the doorway.

“I’m going to come in again,” he said, “and when I do, I don’twant to see anything of that kind going on whatsoever. Is thatunderstood?” He turned and disappeared.

Dirk leapt for the cassette player and hit the Rewind button.Then he turned and hissed at the empty air, “I don’t know who you are,but I can guess. If you want my help, don’t you ever embarrass me likethat again!”

A few moments later, Gilks walked in again. “Ah, there you are,”he said.

He surveyed the wreckage with an even gaze. “I’ll pretend I can’tsee any of this, so that I won’t have to ask any questions the answersto which would, I know, only irritate me.”

Dirk glowered.

In the moment or two of silence that followed, a slight tickingwhirr could be heard which caused the sergeant to look sharply at thecassette player.

“What’s that tape doing?”

“Rewinding.”

“Give it to me.”

The tape reached the beginning and stopped as Dirk reached it. Hetook it out and handed it to Gilks.

“Irritatingly, this seems to put your client completely in theclear,” said the sergeant. “Cellnet have confirmed that the last callmade from the car was at 8.46 pm last night, at which point your clientwas lightly dozing in front of several hundred witnesses. I saywitnesses, in fact they were mostly students, but we will probably beforced to assume that they can’t all be lying.”

“Good,” said Dirk, “well, I’m glad that’s all cleared up.”

“We never thought he had actually done it, of course. Simplydidn’t fit. But you know us — we like to get results. Tell him westill want to ask him some questions, though.”

“I shall be sure to mention it if I happen to run into him.”

“You just do that little thing.”

“Well, I shan’t detain you any longer, Sergeant,” said Dirk, airily waving at the door.

“No, but I shall bloody detain you if you’re not out of here inthirty seconds, Cjelli. I don’t know what you’re up to, but if I canpossibly avoid finding out I shall sleep easier in my office. Out.”

“Then I shall bid you good day, Sergeant. I won’t say it’s been apleasure because it hasn’t.”

Dirk swept out of the room, and made his way out of the flat,noting with sorrow that where there had been a large

chesterfield sofawedged magnificently in the staircase, there was now just a small, sadpile of sawdust.

With a jerk Michael Wenton-Weakes looked up from his book.

His mind suddenly was alive with purpose. Thoughts, images,memories, intentions, all crowded in upon him, and the more they seemedto contradict each other the more they seemed to fit together, to pairand settle.

The match at last was perfect, the teeth of one slowly alignedwith the teeth of another.

A pull and they were zipped.

Though the waiting had seemed an eternity of eternities when itwas filled with failure, with fading waves of weakness, with feeblegroping and lonely impotence, the match once made cancelled it all.Would cancel it all. Would undo what had been so disastrously done.

Who thought that? It did not matter, the match was made, thematch was perfect.

Michael gazed out of the window across the well-manicured Chelseastreet and did not care whether what he saw were slimy things with legsor whether they were all Mr A. K. Ross. What mattered was what they hadstolen and what they would be compelled to return. Ross now lay in thepast. What he was now concerned with lay still further in it.

His large soft cowlike eyes returned to the last few lines of”Kubla Khan”, which he had just been reading. The match was made, thezip was pulled.

He closed the book and put it in his pocket.

His path back now was clear. He knew what he must do. It onlyremained to do a little shopping and then do it.

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CHAPTER 22

"You? Wanted for murder? Richard what are you talking about?"

The telephone wavered in Richard's hand. He was holding it abouthalf an inch away from his ear anyway because it seemed that somebodyhad dipped the earpiece in some chow mein recently, but that wasn't sobad. This was a public telephone so it was clearly an oversight that itwas working at all. But Richard was beginning to feel as if the wholeworld had shifted about half an inch away from him, like someone in adeodorant commercial.

"Gordon," said Richard, hesitantly, "Gordon's been murdered -?hasn't he?"

Susan paused before she answered.

"Yes, Richard," she said in a distressed voice, "but no onethinks you did it. They want to question you of course, but — "

"So there are no police with you now?"

"No, Richard," insisted Susan, "Look, why don't you come here?"

"And they're not out searching for me?"

"No! Where on earth did you get the idea that you were wanted for — that they thought you had done it?"

"Er — well, this friend of mine told me."

"Who?"

"Well, his name is Dirk Gently."

"You've never mentioned him. Who is he? Did he say anythingelse?"

"He hypnotised me and, er, made me jump in the canal, and, er,well, that was it really — "

There was a terribly long pause at the other end.

"Richard," said Susan at last with the sort of calmness thatcomes over people when they realise that however bad things may seem tobe, there is absolutely no reason why they shouldn't simply get worseand worse, "come over here. I was going to say I need to see you, but Ithink you need to see me."

"I should probably go to the police."

"Go to the police later. Richard, please. A few hours won't makeany difference. I…I can hardly even think. Richard, it's so awful. Itwould just help if you were here. Where are you?"

"OK," said Richard, "I'll be with you in about twenty minutes."

"Shall I leave the window open or would you like to try

thedoor?” she said with a sniff.

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CHAPTER 23

“No, please,” said Dirk, restraining Miss Pearce’s hand fromopening a letter from the Inland Revenue, “there are wilder skies thanthese.”

He had emerged from a spell of tense brooding in his darkenedoffice and there was an air of excited concentration about him. It had taken his actual signature on an actual salary cheque to persuade MissPearce to forgive him for the latest unwarrantable extravagance withwhich he had returned to the office and he felt that just to sit thereblatantly opening letters from the taxman was to take his magnanimousgesture in entirely the wrong spirit.

She put the envelope aside.

“Come!” he said. “I have something I wish you to see. I shallobserve your reactions with the very greatest of interest.”

He bustled back into his own office and sat at his desk.

She followed him in patiently and sat opposite, pointedlyignoring the new unwarrantable extravagance sitting on the desk.

The flashy brass plaque for the door had stirred her up prettybadly but the silly phone with big red push buttons she regarded asbeing beneath contempt. And she certainly wasn’t going to do anythingrash like smile until she knew for certain that the cheque wouldn’tbounce. The last time he signed a cheque for her he cancelled it beforethe end of the day, to prevent it, as he explained, “falling into thewrong hands”. The wrong hands presumably, being those of her bankmanager.

He thrust a piece of paper across the desk.

She picked it up and looked at it. Then she turned it round andlooked at it again. She looked at the other side and then she put itdown.

“Well?” demanded Dirk. “What do you make of it? Tell me!”

Miss Pearce sighed.

“It’s a lot of meaningless squiggles done in blue felt tip on apiece of typing paper,” she said. “It looks like you did them yourself.”

“No!” barked Dirk, “Well, yes,” he admitted, “but only because Ibelieve that it is the answer to the problem!”

“What problem?”

“The problem,” insisted Dirk, slapping the table, “of theconjuring trick! I told you!”

“Yes, Mr Gently, several times. I think it was just a

conjuringtrick. You see them on the telly."

"With this difference — that this one was completelyimpossible!"

"Couldn't have been impossible or he wouldn't have done it.Stands to reason."

"Exactly!" said Dirk excitedly. "Exactly! Miss Pearce, you are alady of rare perception and insight."

"Thank you, sir, can I go now?"

"Wait! I haven't finished yet! Not by a long way, not by abucketful! You have demonstrated to me the depth of your perception andinsight, allow me to demonstrate mine!"

Miss Pearce slumped patiently in her seat.

"I think," said Dirk, "you will be impressed. Consider this. Anintractable problem. In trying to find the solution to it I was goinground and round in little circles in my mind, over and over the samemaddening things. Clearly I wasn't going to be able to think ofanything else until I had the answer, but equally clearly I would haveto think of something else if I was ever going to get the answer. Howto break this circle? Ask me how."

"How?" said Miss Pearce obediently, but without enthusiasm.

"By writing down what the answer is!" exclaimed Dirk. "And hereit is!" He slapped the piece of paper triumphantly and sat back with asatisfied smile.

Miss Pearce looked at it dumbly.

"With the result," continued Dirk, "that I am now able to turn mymind to fresh and intriguing problems, like, for instance…"

He took the piece of paper, covered with its aimless squigglesand doodlings, and held it up to her.

"What language," he said in a low, dark voice, "is this writtenin?"

Miss Pearce continued to look at it dumbly.

Dirk flung the piece of paper down, put his feet up on the table,and threw his head back with his hands behind it.

"You see what I have done?" he asked the ceiling, which seemed toflinch slightly at being yanked so suddenly into the conversation. "Ihave transformed the problem from an intractably difficult and possiblyquite insoluble conundrum into a mere linguistic puzzle. Albeit," hemuttered, after a long moment of silent pondering, "an intractablydifficult and possibly insoluble one."

He swung back to gaze intently at Janice Pearce.

"Go on," he urged, "say that it's insane — but it might justwork!"

Janice Pearce cleared her throat.

“It’s insane,” she said, “trust me.”

Dirk turned away and sagged sideways off his chair, much as thesitter for The Thinker probably did when Rodin went off to be excused.

He suddenly looked profoundly tired and depressed.

“I know,” he said in a low, dispirited voice, “that there issomething profoundly wrong somewhere. And I know that I must go toCambridge to put it right. But I would feel less fearful if I knew what it was…”

“Can I get on now, please, then?” said Miss Pearce.

Dirk looked up at her glumly.

“Yes,” he said with a sigh, “but just — just tell me — ” heflicked at the piece of paper with his fingertips — “what do you thinkof this, then?”

“Well, I think it’s childish,” said Janice Pearce, frankly.

“But — but — but!” said Dirk thumping the table in frustration.”Don’t you understand that we need to be childish in order tounderstand? Only a child sees things with perfect clarity, because ithasn’t developed all those filters which prevent us from seeing thingsthat we don’t expect to see?”

“Then why don’t you go and ask one?”

“Thank you, Miss Pearce,” said Dirk reaching for his hat, “onceagain you have rendered me an inestimable service for which I amprofoundly grateful.”

He swept out.

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CHAPTER 24

The weather began to bleaken as Richard made his way to Susan'sflat. The sky which had started out with such verve and spirit in themorning was beginning to lose its concentration and slip back into itsnormal English condition, that of a damp and rancid dish cloth. Richardtook a taxi, which got him there in a few minutes.

"They should all be deported," said the taxi driver as they drewto a halt.

"Er, who should?" said Richard, who realised he hadn't beenlistening to a word the driver said.

"Er — "said the driver, who suddenly realised he hadn't beenlistening either, "er, the whole lot of them. Get rid of the wholebloody lot, that's what I say. And their bloody newts," he added forgood measure.

"Expect you're right," said Richard, and hurried into the house.

Arriving at the front door of her flat he could hear from withinthe sounds of Susan's cello playing a slow, stately melody. He was gladof that, that she was playing. She had an amazing emotional selfsufficiency and control provided she could play her cello. He hadnoticed an odd and extraordinary thing about her relationship with themusic she played. If ever she was feeling emotional or upset she couldsit and play some music with utter concentration and emerge seemingfresh and calm.

The next time she played the same music, however, it would allburst from her and she would go completely to pieces.

He let himself in as quietly as possible so as not to disturb herconcentration.

He tiptoed past the small room she practised in, but the door wasopen so he paused and looked at her, with the slightest of signals thatshe shouldn't stop. She was looking pale and drawn but gave him aflicker of a smile and continued bowing with a sudden intensity.

With an impeccable timing of which it is very rarely capable thesun chose that moment to burst briefly through the gatheringrainclouds, and as she played her cello a stormy light played on herand on the deep old brown of the wood of the instrument. Richard stoodtransfixed. The turmoil of the day stood still for a moment and kept arespectful distance.

He didn't know the music, but it sounded like Mozart and heremembered her saying she had some Mozart to learn. He

walked quietlyon and sat down to wait and listen.

Eventually she finished the piece, and there was about a minuteof silence before she came through. She blinked and smiled and gave hima long, trembling hug, then released herself and put the phone back onthe hook. It usually got taken off when she was practising.

"Sorry," she said, "I didn't want to stop." She briskly brushedaway a tear as if it was a slight irritation. "How are you Richard?"

He shrugged and gave her a bewildered look. That seemed about tocover it.

"And I'm going to have to carry on, I'm afraid," said Susan witha sigh "I'm sorry. I've just been…" She shook her head. "Who would doit?"

"I don't know. Some madman. I'm not sure that it matters who."

"No," she said. "Look, er, have you had any lunch?"

"No. Susan, you keep playing and I'll see what's in the fridge.We can talk about it all over some lunch."

Susan nodded.

"All right," she said, "except…"

"Yes?"

"Well, just for the moment I don't really want to talk aboutGordon. Just till it sinks in. I feel sort of caught out. It would beeasier if I'd been closer to him, but I wasn't and I'm sort ofembarrassed by not having a reaction ready. Talking about it would beall right except that you have to use the past tense and that'swhat's…"

She clung to him for a moment and then quieted herself with asigh.

"There's not much in the fridge at the moment," she said, "someyoghurt, I think, and a jar of roll-mop herrings you could open. I'msure you'll be able to muck it up if you try, but it's actually quitestraightforward. The main trick is not to throw them all over the flooror get jam on them."

She gave him a hug, a kiss and a glum smile and then retreatedback to her music room.

The phone rang and Richard answered it.

"Hello?" he said. There was nothing, just a faint sort of windynoise on the line.

"Hello?" he said again, waited, shrugged and put the phone backdown.

"Was there anybody there?" called Susan.

"No, no one," said Richard.

“That’s happened a couple of times,” said Susan. “I think it’s asort of minimalist heavy breather.” She resumed playing.

Richard went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. He was lessof a health-conscious eater than Susan and was therefore less than thrilled by what he found there, but he managed to put some roll-mopherrings, some yoghurt, some rice and some oranges on a tray withoutdifficulty and tried not to think that a couple of fat hamburgers andfries would round it off nicely.

He found a bottle of white wine and carried it all through to thesmall dining table.

After a minute or two Susan joined him there. She was at her mostcalm and composed, and after a few mouthsful she asked him about thecanal.

Richard shook his head in bemusement and tried to explain about it, and about Dirk.

“What did you say his name was?” said Susan with a frown when hehad come, rather lamely, to a conclusion.

“It’s, er, Dirk Gently,” said Richard, “in a way.”

“In a way?”

“Er, yes,” said Richard with a difficult sigh. He reflected thatjust about anything you could say about Dirk was subject to these kindof vague and shifty qualifications. There was even, on his letterheading, a string of vague and shifty-looking qualifications after hisname. He pulled out the piece of paper on which he had vainly beentrying to organise his thoughts earlier in the day.

“I…” he started, but the doorbell rang. They looked at eachother.

“If it’s the police,” said Richard, “I’d better see them. Let’sget it over with.”

Susan pushed back her chair, went to the front door and picked upthe Entryphone.

“Hello?” she said.

“Who?” she said after a moment. She frowned as she listened then swung round and frowned at Richard.

“You’d better come up,” she said in a less than friendly tone ofvoice and then pressed the button. She came back and sat down.

“Your friend,” she said evenly, “Mr Gently.”

The Electric Monk’s day was going tremendously well and he brokeinto an excited gallop. That is to say that, excitedly, he spurred hishorse to a gallop and, unexcitedly, his horse broke into it.

This world, the Monk thought, was a good one. He loved it.

Hedidn't know whose it was or where it had come from, but it wascertainly a deeply fulfilling place for someone with his unique andextraordinary gifts.

He was appreciated. All day he had gone up to people, fallen intoconversation with them, listened to their troubles, and then quietlyuttered those three magic words, "I believe you."

The effect had invariably been electrifying. It wasn't thatpeople on this world didn't occasionally say it to each other, but theyrarely, it seemed, managed to achieve that deep timbre of sinceritywhich the Monk had been so superbly programmed to reproduce.

On his own world, after all, he was taken for granted. Peoplewould just expect him to get on and believe things for them withoutbothering them. Someone would come to the door with some great new ideaor proposal or even a new religion, and the answer would be "Oh, go andtell that to the Monk." And the Monk would sit and listen and patientlybelieve it all, but no one would take any further interest.

Only one problem seemed to arise on this otherwise excellentworld. Often, after he had uttered the magic words, the subject wouldrapidly change to that of money, and the Monk of course didn't have any– a shortcoming that had quickly blighted a number of otherwise verypromising encounters.

Perhaps he should acquire some — but where?

He reined his horse in for a moment, and the horse jerkedgratefully to a halt and started in on the grass on the roadside verge.The horse had no idea what all this galloping up and down was in aidof, and didn't care. All it did care about was that it was being madeto gallop up and down past a seemingly perpetual roadside buffet. Itmade the best of its moment while it had it.

The Monk peered keenly up and down the road. It seemed vaguely familiar. He trotted a little further up it for another look. The horse

resumed its meal a few yards further along.

Yes. The Monk had been here last night.

He remembered it clearly, well, sort of clearly. He believed thathe remembered it clearly, and that, after all, was the main thing. Herewas where he had walked to in a more than usually confused state ofmind, and just around the very next corner, if he was not very muchmistaken, again, lay the small roadside establishment at which he hadjumped into the back of that nice man's car — the nice man who hadsubsequently reacted so oddly to being shot at.

Perhaps they would have some money there and would let him haveit. He wondered. Well, he would find out. He yanked the horse from itsfeast once again and galloped towards it.

As he approached the petrol station he noticed a car parked thereat an arrogant angle. The angle made it quite clear that the car wasnot there for anything so mundane as to have petrol put into it, andwas much too important to park itself neatly out of the way. Any othercar that arrived for petrol would just have to manoeuvre around it asbest it could. The car was white with stripes and badges and importantlooking lights.

Arriving at the forecourt the Monk dismounted and tethered hishorse to a pump. He walked towards the small shop building and saw thatinside it there was a man with his back to him wearing a dark blueuniform and a peaked cap. The man was dancing up and down and twistinghis fingers in his ears, and this was clearly making a deep impressionon the man behind the till.

The Monk watched in transfixed awe. The man, he believed with aninstant effortlessness which would have impressed even a Scientologist,must be a God of some kind to arouse such fervour. He waited with bated breath to worship him. In a moment the man turned around and walked outof the shop, saw the Monk and stopped dead.

The Monk realised that the God must be waiting for him to make anact of worship, so he reverently danced up and down twisting hisfingers in his ears.

His God stared at him for a moment, caught hold of him, twistedhim round, slammed him forward spreadeagled over the car and friskedhim for weapons.

Dirk burst into the flat like a small podgy tornado.

“Miss Way,” he said, grasping her slightly unwilling hand anddoffing his absurd hat, “it is the most inexpressible pleasure to meetyou, but also the matter of the deepest regret that the occasion of ourmeeting should be one of such great sorrow and one which bids me extendto you my most profound sympathy and commiseration. I ask you tobelieve me that I would not intrude upon your private grief for all theworld if it were not on a matter of the gravest moment and magnitude.Richard — I have solved the problem of the conjuring trick and it’sextraordinary.”

He swept through the room and deposited himself on a spare chairat the small dining table, on which he put his hat.

“You will have to excuse us, Dirk — ” said Richard, coldly.

“No, I am afraid you will have to excuse me,” returned Dirk. “Thepuzzle is solved, and the solution is so astounding that it took aseven-year-old child on the street to give it to me. But it

isundoubtedly the correct one, absolutely undoubtedly. “What, then, isthe solution?” you ask me, or rather would ask me if you could get aword in edgeways, which you can’t, so I will save you the bother and ask the question for you, and answer it as well by saying that I willnot tell you, because you won’t believe me. I shall instead show you,this very afternoon.

“Rest assured, however, that it explains everything. It explainsthe trick. It explains the note you found — that should have made itperfectly clear to me but I was a fool. And it explains what themissing third question was, or rather — and this is the significantpoint — it explains what the missing first question was!”

“What missing question?” exclaimed Richard, confused by thesudden pause, and leaping in with the first phrase he could grab.

Dirk blinked as if at an idiot. “The missing question that GeorgeIII asked, of course,” he said.

“Asked who?”

“Well, the Professor,” said Dirk impatiently. “Don’t you listento anything you say? The whole thing was obvious!” he exclaimed,thumping the table, “So obvious that the only thing which prevented mefrom seeing the solution was the trifling fact that it was completelyimpossible. Sherlock Holmes observed that once you have eliminated theimpossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be theanswer. I, however, do not like to eliminate the impossible. Now. Letus go.”

“No.”

“What?” Dirk glanced up at Susan, from whom this unexpected — orat least, unexpected to him — opposition had come.

“Mr Gently,” said Susan in a voice you could notch a stick with,”why did you deliberately mislead Richard into thinking that he waswanted by the police?”

Dirk frowned.

“But he was wanted by the police,” he said, “and still is.”

“Yes, but just to answer questions! Not because he’s a suspectedmurderer.”

Dirk looked down.

“Miss Way,” he said, “the police are interested in knowing whomurdered your brother. I, with the very greatest respect, am not. Itmay, I concede, turn out to have a bearing on the case, but it may justas likely turn out to be a casual madman. I wanted to know, still needdesperately to know, why Richard climbed into this flat last night.”

“I told you,” protested Richard.

“What you told me is immaterial — it only reveals the crucialfact that you do not know the reason yourself! For heaven’s sake Ithought I had demonstrated that to you clearly enough at the canal!”

Richard simmered.

“It was perfectly clear to me watching you,” pursued Dirk, “thatyou had very little idea what you were doing, and had absolutely noconcern about the physical danger you were in. At first I thought,watching, that it was just a brainless thug out on his first and quitepossibly last burgle. But then the figure looked back and I realised itwas you — and I know you to be an intelligent, rational, and moderateman. Richard MacDuff? Risking his neck carelessly climbing updrainpipes at night? It seemed to me that you would only behave in sucha reckless and extreme way if you were desperately worried aboutsomething of terrible importance. Is that not true, Miss Way?”

He looked sharply up at Susan, who slowly sat down, looking athim with an alarm in her eyes which said that he had struck home.

“And yet, when you came to see me this morning you seemedperfectly calm and collected. You argued with me perfectly rationallywhen I talked a lot of nonsense about Schrodinger’s Cat. This was not the behaviour of someone who had the previous night been driven toextremes by some desperate purpose. I confess that it was at thatmoment that I stooped to, well, exaggerating your predicament, simplyin order to keep hold of you.”

“You didn’t. I left.”

“With certain ideas in your head. I knew you would be back. Iapologise most humbly for having misled you, er, somewhat, but I knewthat what I had to find out lay far beyond what the police wouldconcern themselves with. And it was this — if you were not quiteyourself when you climbed the wall last night…then who were you, -?and why?”

Richard shivered. A silence lengthened.

“What has it got to do with conjuring tricks?” he said at last.

“That is what we must go to Cambridge to find out.”

“But what makes you so sure — ?”

“It disturbs me,” said Dirk, and a dark and heavy look came intohis face.

For one so garrulous he seemed suddenly oddly reluctant to speak.

He continued, “It disturbs me very greatly when I find that

Iknow things and do not know why I know them. Maybe it is the sameinstinctive processing of data that allows you to catch a ball almostbefore you've seen it. Maybe it is the deeper and less explicableinstinct that tells you when someone is watching you. It is a verygreat offence to my intellect that the very things that I despise otherpeople for being credulous of actually occur to me. You will rememberthe…unhappiness surrounding certain exam questions."

He seemed suddenly distressed and haggard. He had to dig deepinside himself to continue speaking.

He said, "The ability to put two and two together and come upinstantly with four is one thing. The ability to put the square root offive hundred and thirty-nine point seven together with the cosine oftwenty-six point four three two and come up with…with whatever theanswer to that is, is quite another. And I…well, let me give you anexample."

He leant forward intently. "Last night I saw you climbing intothis flat. I knew that something was wrong. Today I got you to tell meevery last detail you knew about what happened last night, and already,as a result, using my intellect alone, I have uncovered possibly thegreatest secret lying hidden on this planet. I swear to you that thisis true and that I can prove it. Now you must believe me when I tellyou that I know, I know that there is something terribly, desperately,appallingly wrong and that we must find it. Will you go with me now, toCambridge?"

Richard nodded dumbly.

"Good," said Dirk. "What is this?" he added, pointing atRichard's plate.

"A pickled herring. Do you want one?"

"Thank you, no," said Dirk, rising and buckling his coat. "Thereis," he added as he headed towards the door, steering Richard with him,"no such word as "herring" in my dictionary. Good afternoon, Miss Way,wish us God speed."

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CHAPTER 25

There was a rumble of thunder, and the onset of that interminabletight drizzle from the north-east by which so many of the world's most momentous events seem to be accompanied.

Dirk turned up the collar of his leather overcoat against theweather, but nothing could dampen his demonic exuberance as he andRichard approached the great twelfth-century gates.

"St Cedd's College, Cambridge," he exclaimed, looking at them forthe first time in eight years. "Founded in the year something or other,by someone I forget in honour of someone whose name for the momentescapes me."

"St Cedd?" suggested Richard.

"Do you know, I think it very probably was? One of the dullerNorthumbrian saints. His brother Chad was even duller. Has a cathedral in Birmingham if that gives you some idea. Ah, Bill, how good to seeyou again," he added, accosting the porter who was just walking intothe college as well. The porter looked round.

"Mr Cjelli, nice to see you back, sir. Sorry you had a spot ofbother, hope that's all behind you now."

"Indeed, Bill, it is. You find me thriving. And Mrs Roberts? Howis she? Foot still troubling her?"

"Not since she had it off, thanks for asking, sir. Between youand me, sir, I would've been just as happy to have had her amputatedand kept the foot. I had a little spot reserved on the mantelpiece, butthere we are, we have to take things as we find them.

"Mr MacDuff, sir," he added, nodding curtly at Richard. "Oh thathorse you mentioned, sir, when you were here last night, I'm afraid wehad to have it removed. It was bothering Professor Chronotis."

"I was only curious, er, Bill," said Richard. "I hope it didn'tdisturb you."

"Nothing ever disturbs me, sir, so long as it isn't wearing adress. Can't abide it when the young fellers wear dresses, sir."

"If the horse bothers you again, Bill," interrupted Dirk, pattinghim on the shoulder, "send it up to me and I shall speak with it. Now,you mention the good Professor Chronotis. Is he in at the moment? We'vecome on an errand."

"Far as I know, sir. Can't check for you because his phone's outof order. Suggest you go and look yourself. Far left corner of SecondCourt."

"I know it well, Bill, thank you, and my best to what remains

ofMrs Roberts."

They swept on through into First Court, or at least Dirk swept,and Richard walked in his normal heron-like gait, wrinkling up his faceagainst the measly drizzle.

Dirk had obviously mistaken himself for a tour guide.

"St Cedd's," he pronounced, "the college of Coleridge, and thecollege of Sir Isaac Newton, renowned inventor of the milled-edge coinand the catflap!"

"The what?" said Richard.

"The catflap! A device of the utmost cunning, perspicuity andinvention. It is a door within a door, you see, a…"

"Yes," said Richard, "there was also the small matter ofgravity."

"Gravity," said Dirk with a slightly dismissive shrug, "yes,there was that as well, I suppose. Though that, of course, was merely adiscovery. It was there to be discovered."

He took a penny out of his pocket and tossed it casually on tothe pebbles that ran alongside the paved pathway.

"You see?" he said, "They even keep it on at weekends. Someonewas bound to notice sooner or later. But the catflap…ah, there is a very different matter. Invention, pure creative invention."

"I would have thought it was quite obvious. Anyone could havethought of it."

"Ah," said Dirk, "it is a rare mind indeed that can render thehitherto non-existent blindingly obvious. The cry "I could have thoughtof that" is a very popular and misleading one, for the fact is thatthey didn't, and a very significant and revealing fact it is too. Thisif I am not mistaken is the staircase we seek. Shall we ascend?"

Without waiting for an answer he plunged on up the stairs.Richard, following uncertainly, found him already knocking on the innerdoor. The outer one stood open.

"Come in!" called a voice from within. Dirk pushed the door open,and they were just in time to see the back of Reg's white head as hedisappeared into the kitchen.

"Just making some tea," he called out. "Like some? Sit down, sitdown, whoever you are."

"That would be most kind," returned Dirk. "We are two." Dirk sat,and Richard followed his lead.

"Indian or China?" called Reg.

"Indian, please."

There was a rattle of cups and saucers.

Richard looked around the room. It seemed suddenly

humdrum. Thefire was burning quietly away to itself, but the light was that of thegrey afternoon. Though everything about it was the same, the old sofa,the table burdened with books, there seemed nothing to connect it withthe hectic strangeness of the previous night. The room seemed to sitthere with raised eyebrows, innocently saying “Yes?”

“Milk?” called out Reg from the kitchen.

“Please,” replied Dirk. He gave Richard a smile which seemed tohim to be half-mad with suppressed excitement.

“One lump or two?” called Reg again.

“One, please,” said Dirk, “…and two spoons of sugar if youwould.”

There was a suspension of activity in the kitchen. A moment ortwo passed and Reg stuck his head round the door.

“Svlad Cjelli!” he exclaimed. “Good heavens! Well, that was quickwork, young MacDuff, well done. My dear fellow, how very excellent tosee you, how good of you to come.”

He wiped his hands on a tea towel he was carrying and hurriedover to shake hands.

“My dear Svlad.”

“Dirk, please, if you would,” said Dirk, grasping his handwarmly, “I prefer it. It has more of a sort of Scottish dagger feel toit, I think. Dirk Gently is the name under which I now trade. There arecertain events in the past, I’m afraid, from which I would wish todisassociate myself.”

“Absolutely, I know how you feel. Most of the fourteenth century,for instance, was pretty grim,” agreed Reg earnestly.

Dirk was about to correct the misapprehension, but thought thatit might be somewhat of a long trek and left it.

“So how have you been, then, my dear Professor?” he said instead,decorously placing his hat and scarf upon the arm of the sofa.

“Well,” said Reg, “it’s been an interesting time recently, orrather, a dull time. But dull for interesting reasons. Now, sit downagain, warm yourselves by the fire, and I will get the tea andendeavour to explain.” He bustled out again, humming busily, and leftthem to settle themselves in front of the fire.

Richard leant over to Dirk. “I had no idea you knew him so well,”he said with a nod in the direction of the kitchen.

“I don’t,” said Dirk instantly. “We met once by chance at somedinner, but there was an immediate sympathy and rapport.”

“So how come you never met again?”

“He studiously avoided me, of course. Close rapports with peopleare dangerous if you have a secret to hide. And as secrets

go, I fancythat this is somewhat of a biggie. If there is a bigger secret anywherein the world I would very much care," he said quietly, "to know what itis."

He gave Richard a significant look and held his hands out to thefire. Since Richard had tried before without success to draw him out on exactly what the secret was, he refused to rise to the bait on thisoccasion, but sat back in his armchair and looked about him.

"Did I ask you," said Reg, returning at that moment, "if youwanted any tea?"

"Er, yes," said Richard, "we spoke about it at length. I think weagreed in the end that we would, didn't we?"

"Good," said Reg, vaguely, "by a happy chance there seems to besome ready in the kitchen. You'll have to forgive me. I have a memorylike a…like a…what are those things you drain rice in? What am Italking about?"

With a puzzled look he turned smartly round and disappeared oncemore into the kitchen.

"Very interesting," said Dirk quietly, "I wondered if his memorymight be poor."

He stood, suddenly, and prowled around the room. His eyes fell onthe abacus which stood on the only clear space on the large mahoganytable.

"Is this the table," he asked Richard in a low voice, "where youfound the note about the salt cellar?"

"Yes," said Richard, standing, and coming over, "tucked into thisbook." He picked up the guide to the Greek islands and flipped throughit.

"Yes, yes, of course," said Dirk, impatiently. "We know about allthat. I'm just interested that this was the table." He ran his fingersalong its edge, curiously.

"If you think it was some sort of prior collaboration between Regand the girl," Richard said, "then I must say that I don't think itpossibly can have been."

"Of course it wasn't," said Dirk testily, "I would have thoughtthat was perfectly clear."

Richard shrugged in an effort not to get angry and put the bookback down again.

"Well, it's an odd coincidence that the book should have been…"

"Odd coincidence!" snorted Dirk. "Ha! We shall see how much of a coincidence. We shall see exactly how odd it was. I would like you,Richard, to ask our friend how he performed the trick."

"I thought you said you knew already."

“I do,” said Dirk airily. “I would like to hear it confirmed.”

“Oh, I see,” said Richard, “yes, that’s rather easy, isn’t it?Get him to explain it, and then say, “Yes, that’s exactly what Ithought it was!” Very good, Dirk. Have we come all the way up here inorder to have him explain how he did a conjuring trick? I think I mustbe mad.”

Dirk bridled at this.

“Please do as I ask,” he snapped angrily. “You saw him do the trick, you must ask how he did it. Believe me, there is an astoundingsecret hidden within it. I know it, but I want you to hear it fromhim.”

He spun round as Reg re-entered, bearing a tray, which he carriedround the sofa and put on to the low coffee table that sat in front ofthe fire.

“Professor Chronotis…” said Dirk.

“Reg,” said Reg, “please.”

“Very, well,” said Dirk, “Reg…”

“Sieve!” exclaimed Reg.

“What?”

“Thing you drain rice in. A sieve. I was trying to remember theword, though I forget now the reason why. No matter. Dirk, dear fellow,you look as if you are about to explode about something. Why don’t yousit down and make yourself comfortable?”

“Thank you, no, I would rather feel free to pace up and downfretfully if I may. Reg…”

He turned to face him square on, and raised a single finger.

“I must tell you,” he said, “that I know your secret.”

“Ah, yes, er — do you indeed?” mumbled Reg, looking downawkwardly and fiddling with the cups and teapot. “I see.”

The cups rattled violently as he moved them. “Yes, I was afraidof that.”

“And there are some questions that we would like to ask you. Imust tell you that I await the answers with the very greatestapprehension.”

“Indeed, indeed,” Reg muttered. “Well, perhaps it is at lasttime. I hardly know myself what to make of recent events andam…fearful myself. Very well. Ask what you will.” He looked upsharply, his eyes glittering.

Dirk nodded curtly at Richard, turned, and started to pace,glaring at the floor.

“Er,” said Richard, “well. I’d be…interested to know how youdid the conjuring trick with the salt cellar last night.”

Reg seemed surprised and rather confused by the question.

“Theconjuring trick?” he said.

“Er, yes,” said Richard, “the conjuring trick.”

“Oh,” said Reg, taken aback, “well, the conjuring part of it, I’mnot sure I should — Magic Circle rules, you know, very strict aboutrevealing these secrets. Very strict. Impressive trick, though, don’tyou think?” he added slyly.

“Well, yes,” said Richard, “it seemed very natural at the time,but now that I…think about it, I have to admit that it was a bitdumbfounding.”

“Ah, well,” said Reg, “it’s skill. you see. Practice. Make itlook natural.”

“It did look very natural,” continued Richard, feeling his way,”I was quite taken in.”

“You liked it?”

“It was very impressive.”

Dirk was getting a little impatient. He shot a look to thateffect at Richard.

“And I can quite see,” said Richard firmly, “why it’s impossiblefor you to tell me. I was just interested, that’s all. Sorry I asked.”

“Well,” said Reg in a sudden seizure of doubt, “I suppose… well,so long as you absolutely promise not to tell anyone else.” he carriedon, “I suppose you can probably work out for yourself that I used two of the salt cellars on the table. No one was going to notice thedifference between one and another. The quickness of the hand, youknow, deceives the eye, particularly some of the eyes around thattable. While I was fiddling with my woolly hat, giving, though I say somyself, a very cunning simulation of clumsiness and muddle, I simplyslipped the salt cellar down my sleeve. You see?”

His earlier agitation had been swept away completely by hispleasure in showing off his craft.

“It’s the oldest trick in the world, in fact,” he continued, “butnevertheless takes a great deal of skill and deftness. Then a littlelater, of course, I returned it to the table with the appearance ofsimply passing it to someone else. Takes years of practice, of course,to make it look natural, but I much prefer it to simply slipping thething down to the floor. Amateur stuff that. You can’t pick it up, andthe cleaners never notice it for at least a fortnight. I once had adead thrush under my seat for a month. No trick involved there, ofcourse. Cat killed it.”

Reg beamed.

Richard felt he had done his bit, but hadn’t the faintest ideawhere it was supposed to have got them. He glanced at Dirk,

who gavehim no help whatsoever, so he plunged on blindly.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I understand that that can be done bysleight of hand. What I don't understand is how the salt cellar gotembedded in the pot."

Reg looked puzzled once again, as if they were all talking atcross purposes. He looked at Dirk, who stopped pacing and stared at himwith bright, expectant eyes.

"Well, that's…perfectly straightforward," said Reg, "didn'ttake any conjuring skill at all. I nipped out for my hat, youremember?"

"Yes," said Richard, doubtfully.

"Well," said Reg, "while I was out of the room I went to find theman who made the pot. Took some time, of course. About three weeks ofdetective work to track him down and another couple of days to soberhim up, and then with a little difficulty I persuaded him to bake thesalt cellar into the pot for me. After that I briefly stopped offsomewhere to find some, er, powder to disguise the suntan, and ofcourse I had to time the return a little carefully so as to make it alllook natural. I bumped into myself in the ante-room, which I alwaysfind embarrassing, I never know where to look, but, er…well, thereyou have it."

He smiled a rather bleak and nervous smile.

Richard tried to nod, but eventually gave up.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he said.

Reg looked at him in surprise.

"I thought you said you knew my secret," he said.

"I do," said Dirk, with a beam of triumph. "He, as yet, does not,though he furnished all the information I needed to discover it. Letme," he added, "fill in a couple of little blanks. In order to helpdisguise the fact that you had in fact been away for weeks when as faras anyone sitting at the table was concerned you had only popped out ofthe door for a couple of seconds, you had to write down for your ownreference the last thing you said, in order that you could pick up thethread of conversation again as naturally as possible. An importantdetail if your memory is not what it once was. Yes?"

"What it once was," said Reg, slowly shaking his white head, "Ican hardly remember what it once was. But yes, you are very sharp to pick up such a detail."

"And then there is the little matter," continued Dirk, "of thequestions that George III asked. Asked you."

This seemed to catch Reg quite by surprise.

"He asked you," continued Dirk, consulting a small notebook hehad pulled from his pocket, "if there was any particular reason why onething happened after another and if there was any way of

stopping it.Did he not also ask you, and ask you first, if it was possible to movebackwards in time, or something of that kind?”

Reg gave Dirk a long and appraising look.

“I was right about you,” he said, “you have a very remarkablemind, young man.” He walked slowly over to the window that looked outon to Second Court. He watched the odd figures scuttling through ithugging themselves in the drizzle or pointing at things.

“Yes,” said Reg at last in a subdued voice, “that is preciselywhat he said.”

“Good,” said Dirk, snapping shut his notebook with a tight littlesmile which said that he lived for such praise, “then that explains whythe answers were yes, no and maybe — in that order. Now. Where is it?”

“Where is what?”

“The time machine.”

“You’re standing in it.” said Reg.

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CHAPTER 26

A party of noisy people spilled into the train at Bishop'sStortford. Some were wearing morning suits with carnations looking alittle battered by a day's festivity. The women of the party were insmart dresses and hats, chattering excitedly about how pretty Julia hadlooked in all that silk taffeta, how Ralph still looked like a smug oafeven done up in all his finery, and generally giving the whole thingabout two weeks.

One of the men stuck his head out of the window and hailed a passing railway employee just to check that this was the right trainand was stopping at Cambridge. The porter confirmed that of course itbloody was. The young man said that they didn't all want to find theywere going off in the wrong direction, did they, and made a sound alittle like that of a fish barking, as if to indicate that this was apricelessly funny remark, and then pulled his head back in, banging iton the way.

The alcohol content of the atmosphere in the carriage rosesharply.

There seemed to be a general feeling in the air that the best wayof getting themselves in the right mood for the post-wedding receptionparty that evening was to make a foray to the bar so that any membersof the party who were not already completely drunk could finish thetask. Rowdy shouts of acclamation greeted this notion, the trainrestarted with a jolt and a lot of those still standing fell over.

Three young men dropped into the three empty seats round onetable, of which the fourth was already taken by a sleekly overweightman in an old-fashioned suit. He had a lugubrious face and his large,wet, cowlike eyes gazed into some unknown distance.

Very slowly his eyes began to refocus all the way from infinityand gradually to home in on his more immediate surroundings, his newand intrusive companions. There was a need he felt, as he had feltbefore.

The three men were discussing loudly whether they would all go tothe bar, whether some of them would go to the bar and bring back drinksfor the others, whether the ones who went to the bar would get soexcited by all the drinks there that they would stay put and forget tobring any back for the others who would be sitting here anxiouslyawaiting their return, and whether even if they did remember to comeback immediately with the drinks they would actually be capable ofcarrying them and

wouldn't simply throw them all over the carriage onthe way back, incommoding other passengers.

Some sort of consensus seemed to be reached, but almostimmediately none of them could remember what it was. Two of them gotup, then sat down again as the third one got up. Then he sat down. Thetwo other ones stood up again, expressing the idea that it might besimpler if they just bought the entire bar.

The third was about to get up again and follow them, when slowly,but with unstoppable purpose, the cow-eyed man sitting opposite himleant across, and gripped him firmly by the forearm.

The young man in his morning suit looked up as sharply as hissomewhat bubbly brain would allow and, startled, said, "What do youwant?"

Michael Wenton-Weakes gazed into his eyes with terribleintensity, and said, in a low voice, "I was on a ship…"

"What?"

"A ship…" said Michael.

"What ship, what are you talking about? Get off me. Let go!"

"We came," continued Michael, in a quiet, almost inaudible, butcompelling voice, "a monstrous distance. We came to build a paradise. Aparadise. Here."

His eyes swam briefly round the carriage, and then gazed brieflyout through the spattered windows at the gathering gloom of a drizzlyEast Anglian evening. He gazed with evident loathing. His grip on theother's forearm tightened.

"Look, I'm going for a drink," said the wedding guest, thoughfeebly, because he clearly wasn't.

"We left behind those who would destroy themselves with war,"murmured Michael. "Ours was to be a world of peace, of music, of art,of enlightenment. All that was petty, all that was mundane, all thatwas contemptible would have no place in our world…"

The stilled reveller looked at Michael wonderingly. He didn'tlook like an old hippy. Of course, you never could tell. His own elderbrother had once spent a couple of years living in a Druidic commune,eating LSD doughnuts and thinking he was a tree, since when he had goneon to become a director of a merchant bank. The difference, of course,was that he hardly ever still thought he was a tree, except justoccasionally, and he had long ago learnt to avoid the particular claretwhich sometimes triggered off that flashback.

"There were those who said we would fail," continued Michael inhis low tone that carried clearly under the boisterous noise thatfilled the carriage, "who prophesied that we too carried in us

the seedof war, but it was our high resolve and purpose that only art andbeauty should flourish, the highest art, the highest beauty — music.We took with us only those who believed, who wished it to be true.”

“But what are you talking about?” asked the wedding guest thoughnot challengingly, for he had fallen under Michael’s mesmeric spell.”When was this? Where was this?”

Michael breathed hard. “Before you were born — ” he said atlast, “be still, and I will tell you.”

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CHAPTER 27

There was a long startled silence during which the evening gloomoutside seemed to darken appreciably and gather the room into its grip.A trick of the light wreathed Reg in shadows.

Dirk was, for one of the few times in a life of exuberantlyprolific loquacity, wordless. His eyes shone with a child's wonder asthey passed anew over the dull and shabby furniture of the room, thepanelled walls, the threadbare carpets. His hands were trembling.

Richard frowned faintly to himself for a moment as if he wastrying to work out the square root of something in his head, and thenlooked back directly at Reg.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I have absolutely no idea," said Reg brightly, "much of mymemory's gone completely. I am very old, you see. Startlingly old. Yes,I think if I were to tell you how old I was it would be fair to saythat you would be startled. Odds are that so would I, because I can'tremember. I've seen an awful lot, you know. Forgotten most of it, thankGod. Trouble is, when you start getting to my age, which, as I think Imentioned earlier, is a somewhat startling one — did I say that?"

"Yes, you did mention it."

"Good. I'd forgotten whether I had or not. The thing is that yourmemory doesn't actually get any bigger, and a lot of stuff just fallsout. So you see, the major difference between someone of my age andsomeone of yours is not how much I know, but how much I've forgotten.And after a while you even forget what it is you've forgotten, andafter that you even forget that there was something to remember. Thenyou tend to forget, er, what it was you were talking about."

He stared helplessly at the teapot.

"Things you remember…" prompted Richard gently.

"Smells and earrings."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Those are things that linger for some reason," said Reg, shakinghis head in a puzzled way. He sat down suddenly. "The earrings thatQueen Victoria wore on her Silver Jubilee. Quite startling objects.Toned down in the pictures of the period, of course. The smell of thestreets before there were cars in them. Hard to say which was worse.That's why Cleopatra remains so vividly in the memory, of course. Aquite devastating combination of earrings and smell. I think that willprobably be the last thing

that remains when all else has finally fled.I shall sit alone in a darkened room, sans teeth, sans eyes, sanstaste, sans everything but a little grey old head, and in that littlegrey old head a peculiar vision of hideous blue and gold danglingthings flashing in the light, and the smell of sweat, catfood anddeath. I wonder what I shall make of it…"

Dirk was scarcely breathing as he began to move slowly round theroom, gently brushing his fingertips over the walls, the sofa, thetable.

"How long," he said, "has this been — "

"Here?" said Reg. "Just about two hundred years. Ever since Iretired."

"Retired from what?"

"Search me. Must have been something pretty good, though, what doyou think?"

"You mean you've been in this same set of rooms here for… two

hundred years?" murmured Richard. "You'd think someone would notice, orthink it was odd."

"Oh, that's one of the delights of the older Cambridge colleges,"said Reg, "everyone is so discreet. If we all went around mentioningwhat was odd about each other we'd be here till Christmas. Svlad, er -?Dirk, my dear fellow, please don't touch that just at the moment."

Dirk's hand was reaching out to touch the abacus standing on itsown on the only clear spot on the big table.

"What is it?" said Dirk sharply.

"It's just what it looks like, an old wooden abacus," said Reg."I'll show you in a moment, but first I must congratulate you on yourpowers of perception. May I ask how you arrived at the solution?"

"I have to admit," said Dirk with rare humility, "that I did not.In the end I asked a child. I told him the story of the trick and askedhim how he thought it had been done, and he said and I quote, "It'sbleedin" obvious, innit, he must've "ad a bleedin" time machine." Ithanked the little fellow and gave him a shilling for his trouble. Hekicked me rather sharply on the shin and went about his business. Buthe was the one who solved it. My only contribution to the matter was tosee that he must be right. He had even saved me the bother of kickingmyself."

"But you had the perception to think of asking a child," saidReg. "Well then, I congratulate you on that instead."

Dirk was still eyeing the abacus suspiciously.

"How…does it work?" he said, trying to make it sound like

acasual enquiry.

“Well, it’s really terribly simple,” said Reg, “it works any wayyou want it to. You see, the computer that runs it is a rather advancedone. In fact it is more powerful than the sum total of all thecomputers on this planet including — and this is the tricky part -?including itself. Never really understood that bit myself, to be honestwith you. But over ninety-five per cent of that power is used in simplyunderstanding what it is you want it to do. I simply plonk my abacusdown there and it understands the way I use it. I think I must havebeen brought up to use an abacus when I was a…well, a child, Isuppose.

“Richard, for instance, would probably want to use his ownpersonal computer. If you put it down there, where the abacus is themachine’s computer would simple take charge of it and offer you lots ofnice user-friendly time-travel applications complete with pull-downmenus and desk accessories if you like. Except that you point to 1066on the screen and you’ve got the Battle of Hastings going on outsideyour door, er, if that’s the sort of thing you’re interested in.”

Reg’s tone of voice suggested that his own interests lay in otherareas.

“It’s, er, really quite fun in its way,” he concluded. “Certainlybetter than television and a great deal easier to use than a videorecorder. If I miss a programme I just pop back in time and watch it.I’m hopeless fiddling with all those buttons.”

Dirk reacted to this revelation with horror.

“You have a time machine and you use it for… watchingtelevision?”

“Well, I wouldn’t use it at all if I could get the hang of thevideo recorder. It’s a very delicate business, time travel, you know.Full of appalling traps and dangers, if you should change the wrongthing in the past, you could entirely disrupt the course of history.

“Plus, of course, it mucks up the telephone. I’m sorry,” he said to Richard a little sheepishly, “that you were unable to phone youryoung lady last night. There seems to be something fundamentallyinexplicable about the British telephone system, and my time machinedoesn’t like it. There’s never any problem with the plumbing, theelectricity, or even the gas. The connection interfaces are taken careof at some quantum level I don’t entirely understand, and it’s neverbeen a problem.

“The phone on the other hand is definitely a problem. Every timeI use the time machine, which is, of course, hardly at all, partlybecause of this very problem with the phone, the phone

goes haywire andI have to get some lout from the phone company to come and fix it, andhe starts asking stupid questions the answers to which he has no hopeof understanding.

"Anyway, the point is that I have a very strict rule that I mustnot change anything in the past at all — " Reg sighed — "whatever thetemptation."

"What temptation?" said Dirk, sharply.

"Oh, it's just a little, er, thing I'm interested in," said Reg,vaguely, "it is perfectly harmless because I stick very strictly to therule. It makes me sad, though."

"But you broke your own rule!" insisted Dirk. "Last night! Youchanged something in the past — "

"Well, yes," said Reg, a little uncomfortably, "but that wasdifferent. Very different. If you had seen the look on the poor child'sface. So miserable. She thought the world should be a marvellous place,and all those appalling old dons were pouring their withering scorn onher just because it wasn't marvellous for them anymore.

"I mean," he added, appealing to Richard, "remember Cawley. Whata bloodless old goat. Someone should get some humanity into him even ifthey have to knock it in with a brick. No, that was perfectlyjustifiable. Otherwise, I make it a very strict rule — "

Richard looked at him with dawning recognition of something.

"Reg," he said politely, "may I give you a little advice?"

"Of course you may, my dear fellow, I should adore you to," saidReg.

"If our mutual friend here offers to take you for a stroll alongthe banks of the River Cam, don't go."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"He means," said Dirk earnestly, "that he thinks there may besomething a little disproportionate between what you actually did, andyour stated reasons for doing it."

"Oh. Well, odd way of saying it — "

"Well, he's a very odd fellow. But you see, there sometimes maybe other reasons for things you do which you are not necessarily awareof. As in the case of post-hypnotic suggestion — or possession."

Reg turned very pale.

"Possession — " he said.

"Professor — Reg — I believe there was some reason you wantedto see me. What exactly was it?"

"Cambridge! This is…Cambridge!" came the lilting squawk of thestation public address system.

Crowds of noisy revellers spewed out on to the platform

barkingand honking at each other.

“Where’s Rodney?” said one, who had clambered with difficultyfrom the carriage in which the bar was situated. He and his companionlooked up and down the platform, totteringly. The large figure of Michael Wenton-Weakes loomed silently past them and out to the exit.

They jostled their way down the side of the train, looking inthrough the dirty carriage windows. They suddenly saw their missingcompanion still sitting, trance-like, in his seat in the now almostempty compartment. They banged on the window and hooted at him. For amoment or two he didn’t react, and when he did he woke suddenly in apuzzled way as if seeming not to know where he was.

“He’s pie-eyed!” his companions bawled happily, bundlingthemselves on to the train again and bundling Rodney back off.

He stood woozily on the platform and shook his head. Thenglancing up he saw through the railings the large bulk of MichaelWenton-Weakes heaving himself and a large heavy bag into a taxi — cab,and he stood for a moment transfixed.

“‘Straordinary thing,” he said, “that man. Telling me a longstory about some kind of shipwreck.”

“Har har,” gurgled one of his two companions, “get any money offyou?”

“What?” said Rodney, puzzled. “No. No, I don’t think so. Exceptit wasn’t a shipwreck, more an accident, an explosion — ? He seems tothink he caused it in some way. Or rather there was an accident, and hecaused an explosion trying to put it right and killed everybody. Thenhe said there was an awful lot of rotting mud for years and years, andthen slimy things with legs. It was all a bit peculiar.”

“Trust Rodney! Trust Rodney to pick a madman!”

“I think he must have been mad. He suddenly went off on a tangentabout some bird. He said the bit about the bird was all nonsense. He wished he could get rid of the bit about the bird. But then he said itwould be put right. It would all be put right. For some reason I didn’tlike it when he said that.”

“Should have come along to the bar with us. Terribly funny, we -?” “I also didn’t like the way he said goodbye. I didn’t like thatat all.”

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CHAPTER 28

“You remember,” said Reg, “when you arrived this afternoon I saidthat times recently had been dull, but for…interesting reasons?”

“I remember it vividly,” said Dirk, “it happened a mere tenminutes ago. You were standing exactly there as I recall. Indeed youwere wearing the very clothes with which you are currently apparelled,and — “

“Shut up, Dirk,” said Richard, “let the poor man talk, will you?”

Dirk made a slight, apologetic bow.

“Quite so,” said Reg. “Well, the truth is that for many weeks,months even, I have not used the time machine at all, because I had theoddest feeling that someone or something was trying to make me do it.It started as the very faintest urge, and then it seemed to come at mein stronger and stronger waves. It was extremely disturbing. I had tofight it very hard indeed because it was trying to make me do somethingI actually wanted to do. I don’t think I would have realised that itwas something outside of me creating this pressure and not just my ownwishes asserting themselves if it wasn’t for the fact that I was sowary of allowing myself to do any such thing. As soon as I began torealise that it was something else trying to invade me things gotreally bad and the furniture began to fly about. Quite damaged my little Georgian writing desk. Look at the marks on the — “

“Is that what you were afraid of last night, upstairs?” askedRichard.

“Oh yes,” said Reg in a hushed voice, “most terribly afraid. Butit was only that rather nice horse, so that was all right. I expect itjust wandered in when I was out getting some powder to cover up mysuntan.”

“Oh?” said Dirk, “And where did you go for that?” he asked. “Ican’t think of many chemists that a horse would be likely to visit.”

“Oh, there’s a planet off in what’s known here as the Pleiadeswhere the dust is exactly the right — “

“You went,” said Dirk in a whisper, “to another planet? To getface powder?”

“Oh, it’s no distance,” said Reg cheerfully. “You see, the actualdistance between two points in the whole of the space\time continuum isalmost infinitely smaller than the apparent distance between adjacentorbits of an electron. Really, it’s a lot less far

than the chemist,and there's no waiting about at the till. I never have the rightchange, do you? Go for the quantum jump is always my preference. Exceptof course that you then get all the trouble with the telephone.Nothing's ever that easy, is it?"

He looked bothered for a moment.

"I think you may be right in what I think you're thinking,though," he added quietly.

"Which is?"

"That I went through a rather elaborate bit of business toachieve a very small result. Cheering up a little girl, charming,delightful and sad though she was, doesn't seem to be enoughexplanation for — well, it was a fairly major operation in time-engineering, now that I come to face up to it. There's no doubt that itwould have been simpler to compliment her on her dress. Maybethe…ghost — we are talking of a ghost here, aren't we?"

"I think we are, yes," said Dirk slowly.

"A ghost?" said Richard, "Now come on — "

"Wait!" said Dirk, abruptly. "Please continue," he said to Reg.

"It's possible that the…ghost caught me off my guard. I wasfighting so strenuously against doing one thing that it easily trippedme into another — "

"And now?"

"Oh, it's gone completely. The ghost left me last night."

"And where, we wonder," said Dirk, turning his gaze on Richard,"did it go?"

"No, please," said Richard, "not this. I'm not even sure I'veagreed we're talking about time machines yet, and now suddenly it'sghosts?"

"So what was it," hissed Dirk, "that got into you to make youclimb the wall?"

"Well, you suggested that I was under post-hypnotic suggestionfrom someone — "

"I did not! I demonstrated the power of post-hypnotic suggestionto you. But I believe that hypnosis and possession work in very, verysimilar ways. You can be made to do all kinds of absurd things, andwill then cheerfully invent the most transparent rationalisations toexplain them to yourself. But — you cannot be made to do somethingthat runs against the fundamental grain of your character. You willfight. You will resist!"

Richard remembered then the sense of relief with which he had impulsively replaced the tape in Susan's machine last night. It hadbeen the end of a struggle which he had suddenly won. With the sense ofanother struggle that he was now losing he sighed and

related this tothe others.

“Exactly!” exclaimed Dirk. “You wouldn’t do it! Now we’re gettingsomewhere! You see, hypnosis works best when the subject has somefundamental sympathy with what he or she is being asked to do. Find theright subject for your task and the hypnosis can take a very, very deephold indeed. And I believe the same to be true of possession. So. Whatdo we have?

“We have a ghost that wants something done and is looking for theright person to take possession of to do that for him. Professor — “

“Reg — ” said Reg.

“Reg — may I ask you something that may be terribly personal? Iwill understand perfectly if you don’t want to answer, but I will justkeep pestering you until you do. Just my methods, you see. You saidthere was something that you found to be a terrible temptation to you.That you wanted to do but would not allow yourself, and that the ghostwas trying to make you do? Please. This may be difficult for you, but Ithink it would be very helpful if you would tell us what it is.”

“I will not tell you.”

“You must understand how important — “

“I’ll show you instead,” said Reg.

Silhouetted in the gates of St Cedd’s stood a large figurecarrying a large heavy black nylon bag. The figure was that of MichaelWenton — Weakes, the voice that asked the porter if ProfessorChronotis was currently in his room was that of Michael Wenton-Weakes,the ears that heard the porter say he was buggered if he knew becausethe phone seemed to be on the blink again was that of Michael Wenton-Weakes, but the spirit that gazed out of his eyes was his no longer.

He had surrendered himself completely. All doubt, disparity andconfusion had ceased.

A new mind had him in full possession.

The spirit that was not Michael Wenton-Weakes surveyed thecollege which lay before it, to which it had grown accustomed in thelast few frustrating, infuriating weeks.

Weeks! Mere microsecond blinks.

Although the spirit — the ghost — that now inhabited MichaelWenton-Weakes’ body had known long periods of near oblivion, sometimeseven for centuries at a stretch, the time for which it had wandered theearth was such that it seemed only minutes ago that the creatures whichhad erected these walls had arrived. Most of his personal eternity -?not really eternity, but a few billion years could easily seem like it– had been spent

wandering across interminable mud, wading throughceaseless seas, watching with stunned horror when the slimy things withlegs suddenly had begun to crawl from those rotting seas — and herethey were, suddenly walking around as if they owned the place andcomplaining about the phones.

Deep in a dark and silent part of himself he knew that he was nowmad, had been driven mad almost immediately after the accident by theknowledge of what he had done and of the existence he faced, by thememories of his fellows who had died and who for a while had haunted him even as he had haunted the Earth.

He knew that what he now had been driven to would have revolted the self he only infinitesimally remembered, but that it was the onlyway for him to end the ceaseless nightmare in which each second of

billions of years had been worse than the previous one.He hefted the bag and started to walk.

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CHAPTER 29

Deep in the rain forest it was doing what it usually does in rainforests, which was raining: hence the name.

It was a gentle, persistent rain, not the heavy slashing whichwould come later in the year, in the hot season. It formed a finedripping mist through which the occasional shaft of sunlight wouldbreak, be softened and pass through on its way towards the wet bark ofa calvaria tree on which it would settle and glisten. Sometimes itwould do this next to a butterfly or a tiny motionless sparklinglizard, and then the effect would be almost unbearable.

Away up in the high canopy of the trees an utterly extraordinarythought would suddenly strike a bird, and it would go flapping wildlythrough the branches and settle at last in a different and altogetherbetter tree where it would sit and consider things again more calmlyuntil the same thought came along and struck it again, or it was timeto eat.

The air was full of scents — the light fragrance of flowers, andthe heavy odour of the sodden mulch with which the floor of the forestwas carpeted.

Confusions of roots tangled through the mulch, moss grew on them,insects crawled.

In a space in the forest, on an empty patch of wet ground betweena circle of craning trees, appeared quietly and without fuss a plainwhite door. After a few seconds it opened a little way with a slightsqueak. A tall thin man looked out, looked around, blinked in surprise,and quietly pulled the door closed again.

A few seconds later the door opened again and Reg looked out.

“It’s real,” he said, “I promise you. Come out and see foryourself.” Walking out into the forest, he turned and beckoned theother two to follow him.

Dirk stepped boldly through, seemed disconcerted for about thelength of time it takes to blink twice, and then announced that he sawexactly how it worked, that it was obviously to do with the unrealnumbers that lay between minimum quantum distances and defined thefractal contours of the enfolded Universe and he was only astonished athimself for not having thought of it himself.

“Like the catflap,” said Richard from the doorway behind him.

“Er, yes, quite so,” said Dirk, taking off his spectacles andleaning against a tree wiping them, “you spotted of course that I waslying. A perfectly natural reflex in the circumstances as I thinkyou’ll agree. Perfectly natural.” He squinted slightly and

put hisspectacles back on. They began to mist up again almost immediately.

“Astounding,” he admitted.

Richard stepped through more hesitantly and stood rocking for amoment with one foot still on the floor in Reg’s room and the other onthe wet earth of the forest. Then he stepped forward and committedhimself fully.

His lungs instantly filled with the heady vapours and his mindwith the wonder of the place. He turned and looked at the doorwaythrough which he had walked. It was still a perfectly ordinary doorframe with a perfectly ordinary little white door swinging open in it,but it was standing free in the open forest, and through it could clearly he seen the room he had just stepped out of.

He walked wonderingly round the back of the door, testing eachfoot on the muddy ground, not so much for fear of slipping as for fearthat it might simply not be there. From behind it was just a perfectlyordinary open door frame, such as you might fail to find in anyperfectly ordinary rain forest. He walked through the door from behind,and looking back again could once more see, as if he had just steppedout of them again, the college rooms of Professor Urban Chronotis of StCedd’s College, Cambridge, which must be thousands of miles away.Thousands? Where were they?

He peered off through the trees and thought he caught a slightshimmer in the distance, between the trees.

“Is that the sea?” he asked.

“You can see it a little more clearly from up here,” called Reg,who had walked on a little way up a slippery incline and was nowleaning, puffing, against a tree. He pointed.

The other two followed him up, pulling themselves noisily throughthe branches and causing a lot of cawing and complaining from unseenbirds high above.

“The Pacific?” asked Dirk.

“The Indian Ocean,” said Reg.

Dirk wiped his glasses again and had another look.

“Ah, yes, of course,” he said.

“Not Madagascar?” said Richard. “I’ve been there — “

“Have you?” said Reg. “One of the most beautiful and astonishingplaces on Earth, and one that is also full of the mostappalling…temptations for me. No.”

His voice trembled slightly, and he cleared his throat.

“No,” he continued, “Madagascar is — let me see, which directionare we — where’s the sun? Yes. That way. Westish.

Madagascar is aboutfive hundred miles roughly west of here. The island of Reunion liesroughly in-between."

"Er, what's the place called?" said Dirk suddenly, rapping hisknuckles on the tree and frightening a lizard. "Place where that stampcomes from, er — Mauritius."

"Stamp?" said Reg.

"Yes, you must know," said Dirk, "very famous stamp. Can'tremember anything about it, but it comes from here. Mauritius. Famousfor its very remarkable stamp, all brown and smudged and you could buyBlenheim Palace with it. Or am I thinking of British Guiana?"

"Only you," said Richard, "know what you are thinking of."

"Is it Mauritius?"

"It is," said Reg, "it is Mauritius."

"But you don't collect stamps?"

"No."

"What on earth's that?" said Richard suddenly, but Dirk carriedon with his thought to Reg, "Pity, you could get some nice first-daycovers, couldn't you?"

Reg shrugged. "Not really interested," he said.

Richard slithered back down the slope behind them.

"So what's the great attraction here?" said Dirk. "It's not, Ihave to confess, what I was expecting. Very nice in its way, of course,all this nature, but I'm a city boy myself, I'm afraid." He cleaned hisglasses once again and pushed them back up his nose.

He started backwards at what he saw, and heard a strange littlechuckle from Reg. Just in front of the door back into Reg's room, themost extraordinary confrontation was taking place.

A large cross bird was looking at Richard and Richard was lookingat a large cross bird. Richard was looking at the bird as if it was themost extraordinary thing he had ever seen in his life, and the bird waslooking at Richard as if defying him to find its beak even remotelyfunny.

Once it had satisfied itself that Richard did not intend to laugh, the bird regarded him instead with a sort of grim irritabletolerance and wondered if he was just going to stand there or actuallydo something useful and feed it. It padded a couple of steps back and acouple of steps to the side and then just a single step forward again,on great waddling yellow feet. It then looked at him again,impatiently, and squarked an impatient squark.

The bird then bent forward and scraped its great absurd red beakacross the ground as if to give Richard the idea that this might be agood area to look for things to give it to eat.

“It eats the nuts of the calvaria tree,” called out Reg toRichard.

The big bird looked sharply up at Reg in annoyance, as if to saythat it was perfectly clear to any idiot what it ate. It then lookedback at Richard once more and stuck its head on one side as if it had suddenly been struck by the thought that perhaps it was an idiot it hadto deal with, and that it might need to reconsider its strategyaccordingly.

“There are one or two on the ground behind you,” called Regsoftly.

In a trance of astonishment Richard turned awkwardly and saw oneor two large nuts lying on the ground. He bent and picked one up,glancing up at Reg, who gave him a reassuring nod.

Tentatively Richard held the thing out to the bird, which leantforward and pecked it sharply from between his fingers. Then, becauseRichard’s hand was still stretched out, the bird knocked it irritablyaside with its beak.

Once Richard had withdrawn to a respectful distance, it stretchedits neck up, closed its large yellow eyes and seemed to garglegracelessly as it shook the nut down its neck into its maw.

It appeared then to be at least partially satisfied. Whereasbefore it had been a cross dodo, it was at least now a cross, fed dodo,which was probably about as much as it could hope for in this life.

It made a slow, waddling, on-the-spot turn and padded back intothe forest whence it had come, as if defying Richard to find the littletuft of curly feathers stuck up on top of its backside even remotelyfunny.

“I only come to look,” said Reg in a small voice, and glancing athim Dirk was discomfited to see that the old man’s eyes were brimmingwith tears which he quickly brushed away. “Really, it is not for me tointerfere — “

Richard came scurrying breathlessly up to them.

“Was that a dodo?” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Reg, “one of only three left at this time. The yearis 1676. They will all be dead within four years, and after that no onewill ever see them again. Come,” he said, “let us go.”

Behind the stoutly locked outer door in the corner staircase inthe Second Court of St Cedd’s College, where only a millisecond earlierthere had been a slight flicker as the inner door departed, there wasanother slight flicker as the inner door now returned.

Walking through the dark evening towards it the large figure of Michael Wenton-Weakes looked up at the corner windows. If any slightflicker had been visible, it would have gone unnoticed in the dimdancing firelight that spilled from the window.

The figure then looked up into the darkness of the sky, lookingfor what it knew to be there though there was not the slightest chanceof seeing it, even on a clear night which this was not. The orbits ofEarth were now so cluttered with pieces of junk and debris that onemore item among them — even such a large one as this was — would passperpetually unnoticed. Indeed, it had done so, though its influence hadfrom time to time exerted itself. From time to time. When the waves had been strong. Not for nearly two hundred years had they been so strongas now they were again.

And all at last was now in place. The perfect carrier had beenfound.

The perfect carrier moved his footsteps onwards through thecourt.

The Professor himself had seemed the perfect choice at first, butthat attempt had ended in frustration, fury, and then — inspiration!Bring a Monk to Earth! They were designed to believe anything, to becompletely malleable. It could be suborned to undertake the task withthe greatest of ease.

Unfortunately, however, this one had proved to be completelyhopeless. Getting it to believe something was very easy. Getting it tocontinue to believe the same thing for more than five minutes at a timehad proved to be an even more impossible task than that of getting theProfessor to do what he fundamentally wanted to do but wouldn't allowhimself.

Then another failure and then, miraculously, the perfect carrierhad come at last.

The perfect carrier had already proved that it would have nocompunction in doing what would have to be done.

Damply, clogged in mist, the moon struggled in a corner of thesky to rise. At the window, a shadow moved.

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CHAPTER 30

From the window overlooking Second Court Dirk watched the moon.”We shall not,” he said, “have long to wait.”

“To wait for what?” said Richard.

Dirk turned.

“For the ghost,” he said, “to return to us. Professor — ” headded to Reg, who was sitting anxiously by the fire, “do you have anybrandy, French cigarettes or worry beads in your rooms?”

“No,” said Reg.

“Then I shall have to fret unaided,” said Dirk and returned tostaring out of the window.

“I have yet to be convinced,” said Richard, “that there is notsome other explanation than that of…ghosts to — “

“Just as you required actually to see a time machine in operationbefore you could accept it,” returned Dirk. “Richard, I commend you onyour scepticism, but even the sceptical mind must be prepared to acceptthe unacceptable when there is no alternative. If it looks like a duck,and quacks like a duck, we have at least to consider the possibilitythat we have a small aquatic bird of the family Anatidae on our hands.”

“Then what is a ghost?”

“I think that a ghost…” said Dirk, “is someone who died either violently or unexpectedly with unfinished business on his, her — orits — hands. Who cannot rest until it has been finished, or putright.”

He turned to face them again.

“Which is why,” he said, “a time machine would have such afascination for a ghost once it knew of its existence. A time machineprovides the means to put right what, in the ghost’s opinion, wentwrong in the past. To free it.

“Which is why it will be back. It tried first to take possessionof Reg himself, but he resisted. Then came the incident with theconjuring trick, the face powder and the horse in the bathroom which I– ” he paused — “which even I do not understand, though I intend toif it kills me. And then you, Richard, appear on the scene. The ghostdeserts Reg and concentrates instead on you. Almost immediately thereoccurs an odd but significant incident. You do something that you thenwish you hadn’t done.

“I refer, of course, to the phone call you made to Susan and lefton her answering machine.

“The ghost seizes its chance and tries to induce you to undo

it.To, as it were, go back into the past and erase that message — tochange the mistake you had made. Just to see if you would do it. Justto see if it was in your character.

"If it had been, you would now be totally under its control. Butat the very last second your nature rebelled and you would not do it.And so the ghost gives you up as a bad job and deserts you in turn. Itmust find someone else.

"How long has it been doing this? I do not know. Does this nowmake sense to you? Do you recognise the truth of what I am saying?"

Richard turned cold.

"Yes," he said, "I think you must be absolutely right."

"And at what moment, then," said Dirk, "did the ghost leave you?"

Richard swallowed.

"When Michael Wenton-Weakes walked out of the room," he said.

"So I wonder," said Dirk quietly, "what possibilities the ghostsaw in him. I wonder whether this time it found what it wanted. I believe we shall not have long to wait."

There was a knock on the door.

When it opened, there stood Michael Wenton-Weakes.

He said simply, "Please, I need your help."

Reg and Richard stared at Dirk, and then at Michael.

"Do you mind if I put this down somewhere?" said Michael. "It'srather heavy. Full of scuba-diving equipment."

"Oh, I see," said Susan, "oh well, thanks, Nicola, I'll try thatfingering. I'm sure he only put the E flat in there just to annoypeople. Yes, I've been at it solidly all afternoon. Some of thosesemiquaver runs in the second movement are absolute bastards. Well,yes, it helped take my mind off it all. No, no news. It's all justmystifying and absolutely horrible. I don't want even to — look, maybeI'll give you a call again later and see how you're feeling. I know,yes, you never know which is worse, do you, the illness, theantibiotics, or the doctor's bedside manner. Look after yourself, or atleast, make sure Simon does. Tell him to bring you gallons of hotlemon. OK. Well, I'll talk to you later. Keep warm. Bye now."

She put the phone down and returned to her cello. She had hardlystarted to reconsider the problem of the irritating E flat when thephone went again. She had simply left it off the hook for the afternoon, but had forgotten to do so again after making her own call.

With a sigh she propped up the cello, put down the bow, and

wentto the phone again.

“Hello?” she demanded.

Again, there was nothing, just a distant cry of wind. Irritably,she slammed the receiver back down once more.

She waited a few seconds for the line to clear, and then wasabout to take the phone off the hook once more when she realised thatperhaps Richard might need her.

She hesitated.

She admitted to herself that she hadn’t been using the answeringmachine, because she usually just put it on for Gordon’s convenience,and that was something of which she did not currently wish to bereminded.

Still, she put the answering machine on, turned the volume rightdown, and returned again to the E flat that Mozart had put in only toannoy cellists.

In the darkness of the offices of Dirk Gently’s HolisticDetective Agency, Gordon Way clumsily fumbled the telephone receiverback on to its rest and sat slumped in the deepest dejection. He didn’teven stop himself slumping all the way through the seat until he restedlightly on the floor.

Miss Pearce had fled the office the first time the telephone hadstarted actually using itself, her patience with all this sort of thingfinally exhausted again, since which time Gordon had had the office tohimself. However, his attempts to contact anybody had failedcompletely.

Or rather, his attempts to contact Susan, which was all he caredabout. It was Susan he had been speaking to when he died and he knew hehad somehow to speak to her again. But she had left her phone off thehook most of the afternoon and even when she had answered she could not hear him.

He gave up. He roused himself from the floor, stood up, andslipped out and down into the darkening streets. He drifted aimlesslyfor a while, went for a walk on the canal, which was a trick thatpalled very quickly, and then wandered back up to the street again.

The houses with light and life streaming from them upset him mostparticularly since the welcome they seemed to extend would not beextended to him. He wondered if anyone would mind if he simply slippedinto their house and watched television for the evening. He wouldn’t beany trouble.

Or a cinema.

That would be better, he could go to the cinema.

He turned with more positive, if still insubstantial, footstepsinto Noel Road and started to walk up it.

Noel Road, he thought. It rang a vague bell. He had a feelingthat he had recently had some dealings with someone in Noel Road. Whowas it?

His thoughts were interrupted by a terrible scream of horror thatrang through the street. He stood stock still. A few seconds later adoor flew open a few yards from him and a woman ran out of it, wild -?eyed and howling.

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CHAPTER 31

Richard had never liked Michael Wenton-Weakes and he liked him even less with a ghost in him. He couldn't say why, he had nothingagainst ghosts personally, didn't think a person should be judgedadversely simply for being dead, but — he didn't like it.

Nevertheless, it was hard not to feel a little sorry for him.

Michael sat forlornly on a stool with his elbow resting on thelarge table and his head resting on his fingers. He looked ill andhaggard. He looked deeply tired. He looked pathetic. His story had beena harrowing one, and concluded with his attempts to possess first Regand then Richard.

"You were," he concluded, "right. Entirely."

He said this last to Dirk, and Dirk grimaced as if trying not tobeam with triumph too many times in a day.

The voice was Michael's and yet it was not Michael's. Whatevertimbre a voice acquires through a billion or so years of dread andisolation, this voice had acquired it, and it filled those who heard itwith a dizzying chill akin to that which clutches the mind and stomachwhen standing on a cliff at night.

He turned his eyes on Reg and on Richard, and the effect of theeyes, too, was one that provoked pity and terror. Richard had to lookaway.

"I owe you both an apology," said the ghost within Michael "whichI offer you from the depths of my heart, and only hope that as you cometo understand the desperation of my predicament, and the hope whichthis machine offers me, you will understand why I have acted as I have,and that you will find it within yourselves to forgive me. And to helpme. I beg you."

"Give the man a whisky," said Dirk gruffly.

"Haven't got any whisky," said Reg. "Er, port? There's a bottleor so of Margaux I could open. Very fine one. Should be chambred for anhour, but I can do that of course, it's very easy, I — "

"Will you help me?" interrupted the ghost.

Reg bustled to fetch some port and some glasses.

"Why have you taken over the body of this man?" said Dirk.

"I need to have a voice with which to speak and a body with whichto act. No harm will come to him, no harm — "

"Let me ask the question again. Why have you taken over the bodyof this man?" insisted Dirk.

The ghost made Michael's body shrug.

"He was willing. Both of these two gentlemen quite

understandablyresisted being…well, hypnotised — your analogy is fair. This one?Well, I think his sense of self is at a low ebb, and he has acquiesced.I am very grateful to him and will not do him any harm."

"His sense of self," repeated Dirk thoughtfully, "is at a lowebb."

"I suppose that is probably true," said Richard quietly to Dirk."He seemed very depressed last night. The one thing that was importantto him had been taken away because he, well, he wasn't really very goodat it. Although he's proud I expect he was probably quite receptive tothe idea of actually being wanted for something."

"Hmmm," said Dirk, and said it again. He said it a third timewith feeling. Then he whirled round and barked at the figure on thestool.

"Michael Wenton-Weakes!"

Michael's head jolted back and he blinked.

"Yes?" he said, in his normal lugubrious voice. His eyes followedDirk as he moved.

"You can hear me," said Dirk, "and you can answer for yourself?"

"Oh, yes," said Michael, "most certainly I can."

"This…being, this spirit. You know he is in you? You accept hispresence? You are a willing party to what he wishes to do?"

"That is correct. I was much moved by his account of himself, andam very willing to help him. In fact I think it is right for me to doso."

"All right," said Dirk with a snap of his fingers, "you can go."

Michael's head slumped forward suddenly, and then after a secondor so it slowly rose again, as if being pumped up from inside like atyre.

The ghost was back in possession.

Dirk took hold of a chair, spun it round and sat astride itfacing the ghost in Michael, peering intently into its eyes.

"Again," he said, "tell me again. A quick snap account."

Michael's body tensed slightly. It reached out to Dirk's arm.

"Don't — touch me!" snapped Dirk. "Just tell me the facts. Thefirst time you try and make me feel sorry for you I'll poke you in theeye. Or at least, the one you've borrowed. So leave out all the stuffthat sounded like…er — "

"Coleridge," said Richard suddenly, "it sounded exactly likeColeridge. It was like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Well bits ofit were."

Dirk frowned. "Coleridge?" he said.

“I tried to tell him my story,” admitted the ghost, “I — “

“Sorry,” said Dirk, “you’ll have to excuse me — I’ve never cross– examined a four-billion-year-old ghost before. Are we talking SamuelTaylor here? Are you saying you told your story to Samuel TaylorColeridge?”

“I was able to enter his mind at…certain times. When he was in an impressionable state.”

“You mean when he was on laudanum?” said Richard.

“That is correct. He was more relaxed then.”

“I’ll say,” snorted Reg, “I sometimes encountered him when he wasquite astoundingly relaxed. Look, I’ll make some coffee.”

He disappeared into the kitchen, where he could be heard laughingto himself.

“It’s another world,” muttered Richard to himself, sitting downand shaking his head.

“But unfortunately when he was fully in possession of himself I,so to speak, was not,” said the ghost, “and so that failed. And what hewrote was very garbled.”

“Discuss,” said Richard, to himself, raising his eyebrows.

“Professor,” called out Dirk, “this may sound absurd. Did – Coleridge ever try to…er…use your time machine? Feel free todiscuss the question in any way which appeals to you.”

“Well, do you know,” said Reg, looking round the door, “he didcome in prying around on one occasion, but I think he was in a greatdeal too relaxed a state to do anything.”

“I see,” said Dirk. “But why,” he added turning back to thestrange figure of Michael slumped on its stool, “why has it taken youso long to find someone?”

“For long, long periods I am very weak, almost totally non? existent, and unable to influence anything at all. And then, of course,before that time there was no time machine here, and…no hope for meat all — “

“Perhaps ghosts exist like wave patterns,” suggested Richard, “like interference patterns between the actual with the possible. There

would be irregular peaks and troughs, like in a musical waveform.”

The ghost snapped Michael’s eyes around to Richard.

“You…” he said, “you wrote that article…”

“Er, yes — “

“It moved me very greatly,” said the ghost, with a suddenremorseful longing in his voice which seemed to catch itself almost asmuch by surprise as it did its listeners.

“Oh. I see,” said Richard, “Well, thank you. You didn’t like itso

much last time you mentioned it. Well, I know that wasn't you assuch — "

Richard sat back frowning to himself.

"So," said Dirk, "to return to the beginning — "

The ghost gathered Michael's breath for him and started again."We were on a ship — " it said.

"A spaceship."

"Yes. Out from Salaxala, a world in…well, very far from here. Aviolent and troubled place. We — a party of some nine dozen of us -?set out, as people frequently did, to find a new world for ourselves.All the planets in this system were completely unsuitable for ourpurpose, but we stopped on this world to replenish some necessarymineral supplies.

"Unfortunately our landing ship was damaged on its way into theatmosphere. Damaged quite badly, but still quite reparable.

"I was the engineer on board and it fell to me to supervise thetask of repairing the ship and preparing it to return to our main ship.Now, in order to understand what happened next you must know somethingof the nature of a highly-automated society. There is no task thatcannot be done more easily with the aid of advanced computerisation.And there were some very specific problems associated with a trip withan aim such as ours — "

"Which was?" said Dirk sharply.

The ghost in Michael blinked as if the answer was obvious.

"Well, to find a new and better world on which we could all livein freedom, peace and harmony forever, of course," he said.

Dirk raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, that," he said. "You'd thought this all out carefully, Iassume."

"We'd had it thought out for us. We had with us some veryspecialised devices for helping us to continue to believe in thepurpose of the trip even when things got difficult. They generallyworked very well, but I think we probably came to rely on them toomuch."

"What on earth were they?" said Dirk.

"It's probably hard for you to understand how reassuring theywere. And that was why I made my fatal mistake. When I wanted to knowwhether or not it was safe to take off, I didn't want to know that itmight not be safe. I just wanted to be reassured that it was. Soinstead of checking it myself, you see, I sent out one of the ElectricMonks."

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CHAPTER 32

The brass plaque on the red door in Peckender Street glittered asit reflected the yellow light of a street lamp. It glared for a momentas it reflected the violent flashing light of a passing police car sweeping by.

It dimmed slightly as a pale, pale wraith slipped silentlythrough it. It glimmered as it dimmed, because the wraith was tremblingwith such terrible agitation.

In the dark hallway the ghost of Gordon Way paused. He neededsomething to lean on for support, and of course there was nothing. Hetried to get a grip on himself, but there was nothing to get a grip on.He retched at the horror of what he had seen, but there was, of course,nothing in his stomach. He half stumbled, half swam up the stairs, likea drowning man trying to grapple for a grip on the water.

He staggered through the wall, through the desk, through thedoor, and tried to compose and settle himself in front of the desk inDirk's office.

If anyone had happened into the office a few minutes later — anight cleaner perhaps, if Dirk Gently had ever employed one, which hedidn't on the grounds that they wished to be paid and he did not wishto pay them, or a burglar, perhaps, if there had been anything in theoffice worth burgling, which there wasn't — they would have seen thefollowing sight and been amazed by it.

The receiver of the large red telephone on the desk suddenlyrocked and tumbled off its rest on to the desk top.

A dialling tone started to burr. Then, one by one, seven of thelarge, easily pushed buttons depressed themselves, and after the verylong pause which the British telephone system allows you within whichto gather your thoughts and forget who it is you're phoning, the soundof a phone ringing at the other end of the line could be heard.

After a couple of rings there was a click, a whirr, and a soundas of a machine drawing breath. Then a voice started to say, "Hello,this is Susan. I can't come to the phone right at the moment becauseI'm trying to get an E flat right, but if you'd like to leave yourname…"

"So then, on the say so of an — I can hardly bring myself toutter the words — Electric Monk," said Dirk in a voice ringing withderision, "you attempt to launch the ship and to your utterastonishment it explodes. Since when — ?"

"Since when," said the ghost, abjectly, "I have been alone

onthis planet. Alone with the knowledge of what I had done to my fellowson the ship. All, all alone…"

"Yes, skip that, I said," snapped Dirk angrily. "What about themain ship? That presumably went on and continued its search for — "

"No."

"Then what happened to it?"

"Nothing. It's still there."

"Still there?"

Dirk leapt to his feet and whirled off to pace the room, his browfuriously furrowed.

"Yes." Michael's head drooped a little, but he looked uppitieously at Reg and at Richard. "All of us were aboard the landingcraft. At first I felt myself to be haunted by the ghosts of the rest,but it was only in my imagination. For millions of years, and thenbillions, I stalked the mud utterly alone. It is impossible for you toconceive of even the tiniest part of the torment of such eternity.Then," he added, "just recently life arose on the planet. Life.Vegetation, things in the sea, then, at last, you. Intelligent life. Iturn to you to release me from the torment I have endured."

Michael's head sank abjectly on to his chest for some few seconds. Then slowly, wobblingly, it rose and stared at them again,with yet darker fires in his eyes.

"Take me back," he said, "I beg you, take me back to the landingcraft. Let me undo what was done. A word from me, and it can be undone,the repairs properly made, the landing craft can then return to themain ship, we can be on our way, my torment will be extinguished, and Iwill cease to be a burden to you. I beg you."

There was a short silence while his plea hung in the air.

"But that can't work, can it?" said Richard. "If we do that, thenthis won't have happened. Don't we generate all sorts of paradoxes?"

Reg stirred himself from thought. "No worse than many that existalready," he said. "If the Universe came to an end every time there wassome uncertainty about what had happened in it, it would never have gotbeyond the first picosecond. And many of course don't. It's like ahuman body, you see. A few cuts and bruises here and there don't hurtit. Not even major surgery if it's done properly. Paradoxes are justthe scar tissue. Time and space heal themselves up around them andpeople simply remember a version of events which makes as much sense asthey require it to make.

"That isn't to say that if you get involved in a paradox a

fewthings won't strike you as being very odd, but if you've got throughlife without that already happening to you, then I don't know whichUniverse you've been living in, but it isn't this one."

"Well, if that's the case," said Richard, "why were you so fierceabout not doing anything to save the dodo?"

Reg sighed. "You don't understand at all. The dodo wouldn't havedied if I hadn't worked so hard to save the coelacanth."

"The coelacanth? The prehistoric fish? But how could one possiblyaffect the other?"

"Ah. Now there you're asking. The complexities of cause andeffect defy analysis. Not only is the continuum like a human body, itis also very like a piece of badly put up wallpaper. Push down a bubblesomewhere, another one pops up somewhere else. There are no more dodosbecause of my interference. In the end I imposed the rule on myselfbecause I simply couldn't bear it any more. The only thing that reallygets hurt when you try and change time is yourself." He smiled bleakly,and looked away.

Then he added, after a long moment's reflection, "No, it can bedone. I'm just cynical because it's gone wrong so many times. This poorfellow's story is a very pathetic one, and it can do no harm to put anend to his misery. It happened so very, very long ago on a dead planet.If we do this we will each remember whatever it is that has happened tous individually. Too bad if the rest of the world doesn't quite agree.It will hardly be the first time."

Michael's head bowed.

"You're very silent, Dirk," said Richard.

Dirk glared angrily at him. "I want to see this ship," hedemanded.

In the darkness, the red telephone receiver slipped and slidfitfully back across the desk. If anybody had been there to see it theymight just have discerned a shape that moved it.

It shone only very faintly, less than would the hands of aluminous watch. It seemed more as if the darkness around it was justthat much darker and the ghostly shape sat within it like thickenedscar tissue beneath the surface of the night.

Gordon grappled one last time with the recalcitrant receiver. At length he got a final grip and slipped it up on to the top of theinstrument.

From there it fell back on to its rest and disconnected the call. At the same moment the ghost of Gordon Way, his last call finallycompleted, fell back to his own rest and vanished.

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CHAPTER 33

Swinging slowly round in the shadow of the Earth, just one morepiece of debris among that which floated now forever in high orbit, wasone dark shape that was larger and more regularly formed than the rest.And far, far older.

For four billion years it had continued to absorb data from theworld below it, scanning, analysing, processing. Occasionally it sentpieces back if it thought they would help, if it thought they might bereceived. But otherwise, it watched, it listened, it recorded. Not thelapping of a wave nor the beating of a heart escaped its attention.

Otherwise, nothing inside it had moved for four billion years,except for the air which circulated still, and the motes of dust withinthe air that danced and danced and danced and danced…and danced.

It was only a very slight disturbance that occurred now. Quietly,without fuss, like a dew drop precipitating from the air on to a leaf,there appeared in a wall which had stood blank and grey for fourbillion years, a door. A plain, ordinary white-panelled door with asmall dented brass handle.

This quiet event, too, was recorded and incorporated in thecontinual stream of data processing that the ship ceaselesslyperformed. Not only the arrival of the door, but the arrival of thosebehind the door, the way they looked, the way they moved, the way theyfelt about being there. All processed, all recorded, all transformed.

After a moment or two had passed, the door opened.

Within it could be seen a room unlike any on the ship. A room ofwooden floors, of shabby upholstery, a room in which a fire danced. Andas the fire danced, its data danced within the ship's computers, andthe motes of dust in the air also danced with it.

A figure stood in the doorway — a large lugubrious figure with astrange light that danced now in its eyes. It stepped forward acrossthe threshold into the ship, and its face was suddenly suffused with acalm for which it had longed but had thought never again to experience.

Following him stepped out a smaller, older man with hair that waswhite and wayward. He stopped and blinked with wonder as he passed fromout of the realm of his room and into the realm of the ship. Followinghim came a third man, impatient and tense, with a large leatherovercoat that flapped about him. He, too, stopped and was momentarilybewildered by something he didn't

understand. With a look of deepestpuzzlement on his face he walked forward and looked around at the greyand dusty walls of the ancient ship.

At last came a fourth man, tall and thin. He stooped as he walkedout of the door, and then instantly stopped as if he had walked into awall.

He had walked into a wall, of a kind.

He stood transfixed. If anyone had been looking at his face atthat moment, it would have been abundantly clear to them that thesingle most astonishing event of this man's entire existence wascurrently happening to him.

When slowly he began to move it was with a curious gait, as if he was swimming very slowly. Each tiniest movement of his head seemed tobring fresh floods of awe and astonishment into his face. Tears welledin his eyes, and he became breathless with gasping wonder.

Dirk turned to look at him, to hurry him along.

"What's the matter?" he called above the noise.

"The…music…" whispered Richard.

The air was full of music. So full it seemed there was room for nothing else. And each particle of air seemed to have its own music, sothat as Richard moved his head he heard a new and different music,though the new and different music fitted quite perfectly with themusic that lay beside it in the air.

The modulations from one to another were perfectly accomplished ?

-astonishing leaps to distant keys made effortlessly in the mereshifting of the head. New themes, new strands of melody, all perfectlyand astoundingly proportioned, constantly involved themselves into thecontinuing web. Huge slow waves of movement, faster dances thatthrilled through them, tiny scintillating scampers that danced on thedances, long tangled tunes whose ends were so like their beginningsthat they twisted around upon themselves, turned inside out, upsidedown, and then rushed off again on the back of yet another dancingmelody in a distant part of the ship.

Richard staggered against the wall.

Dirk hurried to grab him.

"Come on," he said, brusquely, "what's the matter? Can't youstand the music? It's a bit loud, isn't it? For God's sake, pullyourself together. There's something here I still don't understand.It's not right. Come on — "

He tugged Richard after him, and then had to support him asRichard's mind sank further and further under the

overwhelming weightof music. The visions that were woven in his mind by the millionthrilling threads of music as they were pulled through it, wereincreasingly a welter of chaos, but the more the chaos burgeoned themore it fitted with the other chaos, and the next greater chaos, untilit all became a vast exploding ball of harmony expanding in his mindfaster than any mind could deal with.

And then it was all much simpler.

A single tune danced through his mind and all his attentionrested upon it. It was a tune that seethed through the magical flood,shaped it, formed it, lived through it hugely, lived through itminutely, was its very essence. It bounced and trilled along, at firsta little tripping tune, then it slowed, then it danced again but withmore difficulty, seemed to founder in eddies of doubt and confusion,and then suddenly revealed that the eddies were just the first ripplesof a huge new wave of energy surging up joyfully from beneath.

Richard began very, very slowly to faint.

He lay very still.

He felt he was an old sponge steeped in paraffin and left in thesun to dry.

He felt like the body of an old horse burning hazily in the sun.He dreamed of oil, thin and fragrant, of dark heaving seas. He was on awhite beach, drunk with fish, stupefied with sand, bleached, drowsing,pummelled with light, sinking, estimating the density of vapour cloudsin distant nebulae, spinning with dead delight. He was a pump spoutingfresh water in the springtime, gushing into a mound of reeking newmowngrass. Sounds, almost unheard, burned away like distant sleep.

He ran and was falling. The lights of a harbour spun into night.

The sea like a dark spirit slapped infinitesimally at the sand,glimmering, unconscious. Out where it was deeper and colder he sankeasily with the heavy sea swelling like oil around his ears, and wasdisturbed only by a distant burr burr as of the phone ringing.

He knew he had been listening to the music of life itself. Themusic of light dancing on water that rippled with the wind and thetides, of the life that moved through the water, of the life that movedon the land, warmed by the light.

He continued to lie very still. He continued to be disturbed by adistant burr burr as of a phone ringing.

Gradually he became aware that the distant burr burr as of aphone ringing was a phone ringing.

He sat up sharply.

He was lying on a small crumpled bed in a small untidy panelledroom that he knew he recognised but couldn't place. It was clutteredwith books and shoes. He blinked at it and was blank.

The phone by the bed was ringing. He picked it up.

"Hello?" he said.

"Richard!" It was Susan's voice, utterly distraught. He shook hishead and had no recollection of anything useful.

"Hello?" he said again.

"Richard, is that you? Where are you?"

"Er, hold on, I'll go and look."

He put the receiver down on the crumpled sheets, where it laysquawking, climbed shakily off the bed, staggered to the door andopened it.

Here was a bathroom. He peered at it suspiciously. Again, herecognised it but felt that there was something missing. Oh yes. Thereshould be a horse in it. Or at least, there had been a horse in it thelast time he had seen it. He crossed the bathroom floor and went out of the other door. He found his way shakily down the stairs and into Reg'smain room.

He was surprised by what he saw when he got there.

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CHAPTER 34

The storms of the day before, and of the day before that, and thefloods of the previous week, had now abated. The skies still bulgedwith rain, but all that actually fell in the gathering evening gloomwas a dreary kind of prickle.

Some wind whipped across the darkening plain, blundered throughthe low hills and gusted across a shallow valley where stood astructure, a kind of tower, alone in a nightmare of mud, and leaning.

It was a blackened stump of a tower. It stood like an extrusionof magma from one of the more pestilential pits of hell, and it leanedat a peculiar angle, as if oppressed by something altogether moreterrible than its own considerable weight. It seemed a dead thing, longages dead.

The only movement was that of a river of mud that movedsluggishly along the bottom of the valley past the tower. A mile or sofurther on, the river ran down a ravine and disappeared underground.

But as the evening darkened it became apparent that the tower wasnot entirely without life. There was a single dim red light gutteringdeep within it.

It was this scene that Richard was surprised to see from a smallwhite doorway set in the side of the valley wall, a few hundred yards from the tower.

“Don’t step out!” said Dirk, putting up an arm, “The atmosphereis poisonous. I’m not sure what’s in it but it would certainly get yourcarpets nice and clean.”

Dirk was standing in the doorway watching the valley with deepmistrust.

“Where are we?” asked Richard.

“Bermuda,” said Dirk. “It’s a bit complicated.”

“Thank you,” said Richard and walked groggily back across theroom.

“Excuse me,” he said to Reg, who was busy fussing round MichaelWenton-Weakes, making sure that the scuba diving suit he was wearingfitted snuggly everywhere, that the mask was secure and that theregulator for the air supply was working properly.

“Sorry, can I just get past?” said Richard. “Thanks.”

He climbed back up the stairs, went back into Reg’s bedroom, satshakily on the edge of the bed and picked up the phone again.

“Bermuda,” he said, “it’s a bit complicated.”

Downstairs, Reg finished smearing Vaseline on all the joins ofthe suit and the few pieces of exposed skin around the mask, and thenannounced that all was ready.

Dirk swung himself away from the door and stood aside with theutmost bad grace.

“Well then,” he said, “be off with you. Good riddance. I wash myhands of the whole affair. I suppose we will have to wait here for youto send back the empty, for what it’s worth.” He stalked round the sofawith an angry gesture. He didn’t like this. He didn’t like any of it.He particularly didn’t like Reg knowing more about space\time than hedid. It made him angry that he didn’t know why he didn’t like it.

“My dear fellow,” said Reg in a conciliatory tone, “consider whata very small effort it is for us to help the poor soul. I’m sorry if itseems to you an anti-climax after all your extraordinary feats ofdeduction. I know you feel that a mere errand of mercy seems not enoughfor you, but you should be more charitable.”

“Charitable, ha!” said Dirk. “I pay my taxes, what more do youwant?”

He threw himself on to the sofa, ran his hands through his hairand sulked.

The possessed figure of Michael shook hands with Reg and said afew words of thanks. Then he walked stiffly to the door, turned andbowed to them both.

Dirk flung his head round and glared at him, his eyes flashingbehind their spectacles and his hair flying wildly. The ghost looked atDirk, and for a moment shivered inside with apprehension. Asuperstitious instinct suddenly made the ghost wave. He waved Michael’shand round in a circle, three times, and then said a single word.

“Goodbye,” he said.

With that he turned again, gripped the sides of the doorway andstepped resolutely out into the mud, and into the foul and poisonouswind.

He paused for a moment to be sure that his footing was solid,that he had his balance, and then without another look back he walkedaway from them, out of the reach of the slimy things with legs, towardshis ship.

“Now, what on earth did that mean?” said Dirk, irritablymimicking the odd triple wave.

Richard came thundering down the stairs, threw open the door and plunged into the room, wild-eyed.

“Ross has been murdered!” he shouted.

“Who the hell’s Ross?” shouted Dirk back at him.

“Whatsisname Ross, for God’s sake,” exclaimed Richard, “the neweditor of Fathom.”

“What’s Fathom?” shouted Dirk again.

“Michael’s bloody magazine, Dirk! Remember? Gordon chuckedMichael off the magazine and gave it to this Ross guy to fun instead.Michael hated him for that. Well, last night Michael went and bloodymurdered him!”

He paused, panting. “At least,” he said, “he was murdered. AndMichael was the only one with any reason to.”

He ran to the door, looked out at the retreating figuredisappearing into the gloom, and spun round again.

“Is he coming back?” said Richard.

Dirk leapt to his feet and stood blinking for a moment.

“That’s it…” he said, “that’s why Michael was the perfectsubject. That’s what I should have been looking for. The thing theghost made him do in order to establish his hold, the thing he had tobe fundamentally willing to do, the thing that would match the ghost’sown purpose. Oh my dear God. He thinks we’ve supplanted them and that’swhat he wants to reverse.

“He thinks this is their world not ours. This was where they weregoing to settle and build their blasted paradise. It matches every stepof the way.

“You see,” he said, turning on Reg, “what we have done? I wouldnot be surprised to discover that the accident your poor tormented soulout there is trying to reverse is the very thing which started life onthis planet!”

He turned his eyes suddenly from Reg, who was white andtrembling, back to Richard.

“When did you hear this?” he said, puzzled.

“Er, just now,” said Richard, “on…on the phone. Upstairs.”

“What?”

“It was Susan, I don’t know how — said she had a message on heranswering machine telling her about it. She said the message…was from– she said it was from Gordon, but I think she was hysterical. Dirk,what the hell is happening? Where are we?”

“We are four billion years in the past,” said Reg in a shakingvoice, “please don’t ask me why it is that the phone works when we areanywhere in the Universe other than where it’s actually connected,that’s a matter you will have to take up with British Telecom, but — “

“Damn and blast British Telecom,” shouted Dirk, the words comingeasily from force of habit. He ran to the door and peered again at thedim shadowy figure trudging through the mud towards the Salaxalan ship,completely beyond their reach.

“How long,” said Dirk, quite calmly, “would you guess that it’sgoing to take that fat self deluding bastard to reach his ship? Becausethat is how long we have.

“Come. Let us sit down. Let us think. We have two minutes in which to decide what we are going to do. After that, I very muchsuspect that the three of us, and everything we have ever known,including the coelacanth and the dodo, dear Professor, will cease everto have existed.”

He sat heavily on the sofa, then stood up again and removedMichael’s discarded jacket from under him. As he did so, a book fellout of the pocket.

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CHAPTER 35

“I think it’s an appalling act of desecration,” said Richard toReg, as they sat hiding behind a hedge.

The night was full of summer smells from the cottage garden, andthe occasional whiff of sea air which came in on the light breezes thatwere entertaining themselves on the coast of the Bristol Channel.

There was a bright moon playing over the sea off in the distance,and by its light it was also possible to see some distance over Exmoorstretching away to the south of them.

Reg sighed.

“Yes, maybe,” he said, “but I’m afraid he’s right, you know, itmust be done. It was the only sure way. All the instructions wereclearly contained in the piece once you knew what you were looking for.It has to be suppressed. The ghost will always be around. In fact twoof him now. That is, assuming this works. Poor devil. Still, I supposehe brought it on himself.”

Richard fretfully pulled up some blades of grass and twisted thembetween his fingers.

He held them up to the moonlight, turned them to differentangles, and watched the way light played on them.

“Such music,” he said. “I’m not religious, but if I were I wouldsay it was like a glimpse into the mind of God. Perhaps it was and Iought to be religious. I have to keep reminding myself that they didn’tcreate the music, they only created the instrument which could read thescore. And the score was life itself. And it’s all up there.”

He glanced into the sky. Unconsciously he started to quote:

“Could I revive within me Her symphony and songTo such a deep delight “twould win meThat with music loud and longI would build that dome in air,That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!”

“Hmmm,” said Reg to himself, “I wonder if he arrived earlyenough.”

“What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing. Just a thought.”

“Good God, he can talk, can’t he?” Richard exclaimed suddenly.”He’s been in there over an hour now. I wonder what’s going on.”

He got up and looked over the hedge at the small farm cottagebasking in the moonlight behind them. About an hour earlier Dirk hadwalked boldly up to the front door and rapped on

it.

When the door had opened, somewhat reluctantly, and a slightlydazed face had looked out, Dirk had doffed his absurd hat and said in aloud voice, “Mr Samuel Coleridge?

“I was just passing by, on my way from Porlock, you understand,and I was wondering if I might trouble you to vouchsafe me aninterview? It’s just for a little parish broadsheet I edit. Won’t takemuch of your time I promise, I know you must be busy, famous poet likeyou, but I do so admire your work, and…”

The rest was lost, because by that time Dirk had effected hisentry and closed the door behind him.

“Would you excuse me a moment?” said Reg.

“What? Oh sure,” said Richard, “I’m just going to have a look andsee what’s happening.”

While Reg wandered off behind a tree Richard pushed open thelittle gate and was just about to make his way up the path when heheard the sound of voices approaching the front door from within.

He hurriedly darted back, as the front door started to open.

“Well, thank you very much indeed, Mr Coleridge,” said Dirk, ashe emerged, fiddling with his hat and bowing, “you have been most kindand generous with your time, and I do appreciate it very much, as I’msure will my readers. I’m sure it will work up into a very nice littlearticle, a copy of which you may rest assured I will send you for youto peruse at your leisure. I will most certainly welcome your commentsif you have any, any points of style, you know, hints, tips, things ofthat nature. Well, thank you again, so much, for your time, I do hope Ihaven’t kept you from anything important — “

The door slammed violently behind him.

Dirk turned with another in a long succession of triumphant beamsand hurried down the path to Richard.

“Well, that’s put a stop to that,” he said, patting his handstogether, “I think he’d made a start on writing it down, but he won’tremember another word, that’s for certain. Where’s the egregiousProfessor? Ah, there you are. Good heavens, I’d no idea I’d been thatlong. A most fascinating and entertaining fellow, our Mr Coleridge, orat least I’m sure he would have been if I’d given him the chance, but Iwas rather too busy being fascinating myself.

“Oh, but I did do as you asked, Richard, I asked him at the endabout the albatross and he said what albatross? So I said, oh it wasn’timportant, the albatross did not signify. He said what albatross didn’tsignify, and I said never mind the albatross, it

didn’t matter, and hesaid it did matter — someone comes to his house in the middle of the night raving about albatrosses, he wanted to know why. I said blast thebloody albatross and he said he had a good mind to and he wasn’tcertain that that didn’t give him an idea for a poem he was working on.Much better, he said, than being hit by an asteroid, which he thoughtwas stretching credulity a bit. And so I came away.

“Now. Having saved the entire human race from extinction I coulddo with a pizza. What say you to such a proposal?”

Richard didn’t offer an opinion. He was staring instead with somepuzzlement at Reg.

“Something troubling you?” said Reg, taken aback.

“That’s a good trick,” said Richard, “I could have sworn youdidn’t have a beard before you went behind the tree.”

“Oh — ” Reg fingered the luxuriant three-inch growth — “yes,”he said, “just carelessness,” he said, “carelessness.”

“What have you been up to?”

“Oh, just a few adjustments. A little surgery, you understand.Nothing drastic.”

A few minutes later as he ushered them into the extra door that a nearby cowshed had mysteriously acquired, he looked back up into thesky behind them, just in time to see a small light flare up anddisappear.

“Sorry, Richard,” he muttered, and followed them in.

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CHAPTER 36

"Thank you, no," said Richard firmly, "much as I would love the

opportunity to buy you a pizza and watch you eat it, Dirk, I want to gostraight home. I have to see Susan. Is that possible, Reg? Juststraight to my flat? I'll come up to Cambridge next week and collect mycar."

"We are already there," said Reg, "simply step out of the door,and you are home in your own flat. It is early on Friday evening andthe weekend lies before you."

"Thanks. Er, look, Dirk, I'll see you around, OK? Do I owe yousomething? I don't know."

Dirk waved the matter aside airily. "You will hear from my MissPearce in due course," he said.

"Fine, OK, well I'll see you when I've had some rest. It's been,well, unexpected."

He walked to the door and opened it. Stepping outside he foundhimself halfway up his own staircase, in the wall of which the door hadmaterialised.

He was about to start up the stairs when he turned again as athought struck him. He stepped back in, closing the door behind him.

"Reg, could we make one tiny detour?" he said. "I think it wouldbe a good move if I took Susan out for a meal tonight, only the place Ihave in mind you have to book in advance. Could you manage three weeksfor me?"

"Nothing could be easier," said Reg, and made a subtle adjustmentto the disposition of the beads on the abacus. "There," he said, "Wehave travelled backwards in time three weeks. You know where the phoneis."

Richard hurried up the internal staircase to Reg's bedroom andphoned L'Esprit d'Escalier. The maitre d" was charmed and delighted totake his reservation, and looked forward to seeing him in three weeks'time. Richard went back downstairs shaking his head in wonder.

"I need a weekend of solid reality," he said. "Who was that justgoing out of the door?"

"That," said Dirk, "was your sofa being delivered. The man askedif we minded him opening the door so they could manoeuvre it round andI said we would be delighted."

It was only a few minutes later that Richard found himselfhurrying up the stairs to Susan's flat. As he arrived at her

front doorhe was pleased, as he always was, to hear the deep tones of her cellocoming faintly from within. He quietly let himself in and then as hewalked to the door of her music room he suddenly froze in astonishment.The tune she was playing was one he had heard before. A little trippingtune, that slowed, then danced again but with more difficulty…

His face was so amazed that she stopped playing the instant shesaw him.

"What's wrong?" she said, alarmed.

"Where did you get that music?" said Richard in a whisper.

She shrugged. "Well, from the music shop," she said, puzzled. Shewasn't being facetious, she simply didn't understand the question.

"What is it?"

"It's from a cantata I'm playing in in a couple of weeks," shesaid, "Bach, number six."

"Who wrote it?"

"Well, Bach I expect. If you think about it."

"Who?"

"Watch my lips. Bach. B-A-C-H. Johannes Sebastian. Remember?"

"No, never heard of him. Who is he? Did he write anything else?"

Susan put down her bow, propped up her cello, stood up and cameover to him.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"Er, it's rather hard to tell. What's…"

He caught sight of a pile of music books sitting in a corner ofthe room with the same name on the top one. BACH. He threw himself atthe pile and started to scrabble through it. Book after book — J. S.BACH. Cello sonatas. Brandenburg Concertos. A Mass in B Minor.

He looked up at her in blank incomprehension.

"I've never seen any of this before," he said.

"Richard my darling," she said, putting her hand to his cheek,"what on earth's the matter? It's just Bach sheet music."

"But don't you understand?" he said, shaking a handful of thestuff. "I've never, ever seen any of this before!"

"Well," she said with mock gravity, "perhaps if you didn't spendall your time playing with computer music…"

He looked at her with wild surprise, then slowly he sat backagainst the wall and began to laugh hysterically.

On Monday afternoon Richard phoned Reg.

"Reg!" he said. "Your phone is working. Congratulations."

“Oh yes, my dear fellow,” said Reg, “how delightful to hear fromyou. Yes. A very capable young man arrived and fixed the phone a littleearlier. I don’t think it will go wrong again now. Good news, don’t youthink?”

“Very good. You got back safely then.”

“Oh yes, thank you. Oh, we had high excitement here when wereturned from dropping you off. Remember the horse? Well he turned upagain with his owner. They’d had some unfortunate encounter with theconstabulary and wished to be taken home. Just as well. Dangerous sortof chap to have on the loose I think. So. How are you then?

“Reg…The music — “

“Ah, yes, I thought you’d be pleased. Took a bit of work, I cantell you. I saved only the tiniest tiniest scrap, of course, but evenso I cheated. It was rather more than one man could actually do in alifetime, but I don’t suppose anybody will look at that too seriously.”

“Reg, can’t we get some more of it?”

“Well, no. The ship has gone, and besides — “

“We could go back in time — “

“No, well, I told you. They’ve fixed the phone so it won’t gowrong again.”

“So?”

“Well, the time machine won’t work now. Burnt out. Dead as adodo. I think that’s it I’m afraid. Probably just as well, though,don’t you think?”

On Monday, Mrs Sauskind phoned Dirk Gently’s Holistic DetectiveAgency to complain about her bill.

“I don’t understand what all this is about,” she said, “it’scomplete nonsense. What’s the meaning of it?”

“My dear Mrs Sauskind,” he said, “I can hardly tell you how muchI have been looking forward to having this exact same conversation withyou yet again. Where shall we begin today? Which particular item is itthat you would like to discuss?”

“None of them, thank you very much, Mr Gently. I do not know whoyou are or why you should think my cat is missing. Dear Roderick passedaway in my arms two years ago and I have not wished to replace him.”

“Ah, well Mrs Sauskind,” said Dirk, “what you probably fail toappreciate is that it is as a direct result of my efforts that — If Imight explain about the interconnectedness of all…” He stopped. Itwas pointless. He slowly dropped the telephone back on its cradle.

“Miss Pearce!” he called out, “Kindly send out a revised

billwould you to our dear Mrs Sauskind. The new bill reads “To saving humanrace from total extinction — no charge.”"

He put on his hat and left for the day.